

160 PAGES - ALL NEW STORIES

MICHAEL SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

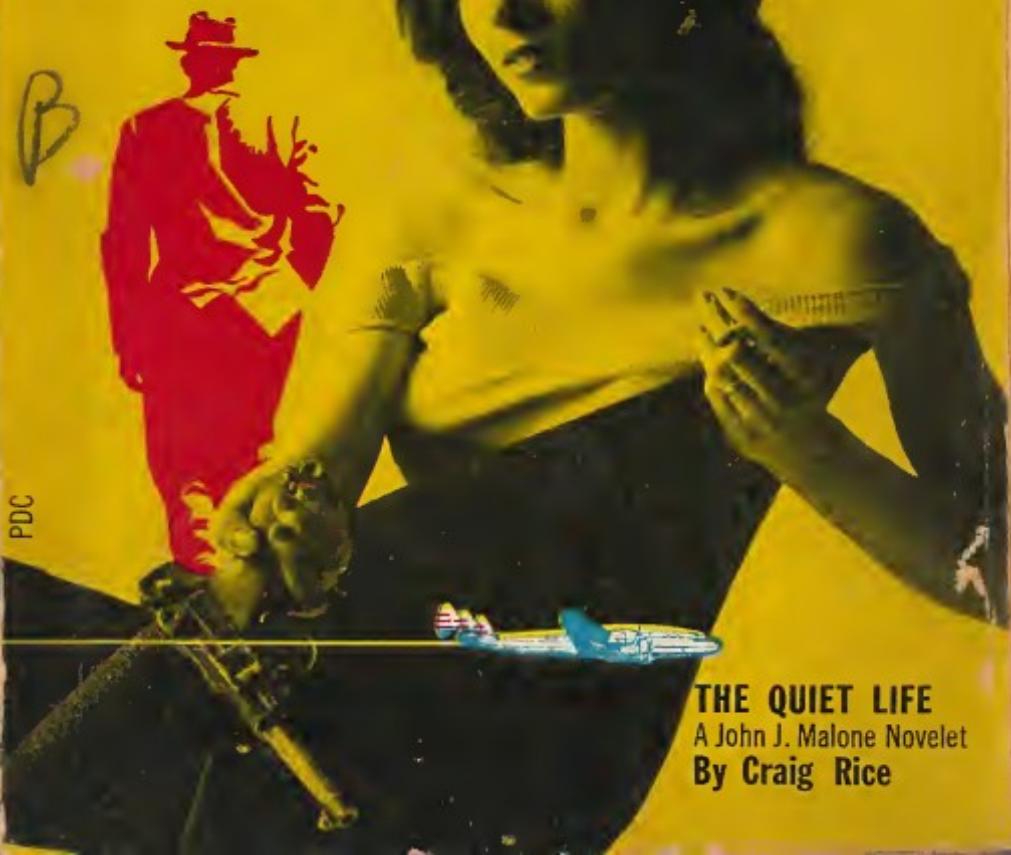
Bullets, Blondes and Mike Shayne . . .

SEPT. 35¢

BRING BACK A CORPSE

in a turbulent novelet by

Brett Halliday



THE QUIET LIFE
A John J. Malone Novelet
By Craig Rice



Full Cycle— New Birth

With publication of this first issue of MICHAEL SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, my Miami character completes the full cycle in print. At the moment, I cannot think of any other publication medium through which Mike can reach readers in the United States, or in the ten foreign countries where his cases have been translated for many years.

I am both proud and gratified that my long-time and valued friend, Leo Margulies, is the publisher and sole owner of this magazine. It is a project that both Leo and I have held in our minds and hearts for many years. But we have waited patiently for the exact moment when the signs were right, when the many and varied elements essential to the production and distribution of a truly fine mystery magazine coincided to make the project feasible.

We are glad, now, that we waited for this moment. I sincerely believe that MICHAEL SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE is the finest periodical of its kind available to the American reader today. I believe, also, that the stories between its covers are a fair sample of what you, the reader, may expect in future issues. We hope to make this the sort of magazine that the millions of Mike Shayne fans throughout the world want to read. Whether you feel that we have achieved our purpose or have fallen short, it is our hope that you will help us by writing a letter to tell us what you like or dislike about this first issue.

Mike has sold more than 14,000,000 copies in the United States. We don't expect 14,000,000 letters, or even 14,000—but, for myself, I hope you break the mailman's back.

Brett Halliday

MICHAEL SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER, 1956

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BRETT HALLIDAY

Shayne didn't want to take on the job of finding Homer Wilde's vanishing business manager. But Lucy Hamilton was one of the great TV star's adoring fans. So, within fourteen hours, the redbeaded detective found himself winging his way to New York on a Super-Constellation. Assignment—

Bring Back a Corpse!

MICHAEL SHAYNE had never seen his secretary look so happily flustered. She sat in her desk chair beyond the low railing, smiling at the telephone mouthpiece. She was saying, "But it's too early. Mr. Shayne never gets in before ten in the morning and I—"

Her head was pulled sharply around at his abrupt entrance. She swallowed hard and stammered, "Just a moment, please. Mr. Shayne just came in," then cupped her hand over the phone and said in a small, awed voice, "It's Homer Wilde, Michael. Take it in your office quick."

Shayne crossed to the railing in two unhurried strides and leaned an elbow on it, grinning indulgently down at Lucy. "You talk to him, Angel. You seemed to be doing all right when I interrupted."

"Please, Michael," she begged. "Don't you understand? It's Homer Wilde himself. He wants to see you."

"For what?" Shayne shook a cigarette from a crumpled pack and stuck it between his lips.

"I don't know. But it must be awfully important for him to call you so early. He wants you over at his hotel on the Beach right after his broadcast tonight."

Shayne yawned and put fire to his cigarette and said, "The hell he does. Tell him to hunt up another errand boy."

Lucy Hamilton's brown eyes blazed at Shayne. Gurgling sounds were coming from the phone, and she removed her hand to say in a dulcet tone, "Yes, Mr. Wilde. I'm terribly sorry, but Mr. Shayne is tied up just for the moment. I'll have him call you right back, if you'll give me your number."

She listened to more gurgling sounds, biting her lower lip anxiously. "I see," she said. "Of course. Just one second."

Again she covered the mouthpiece and turned her head to glare up at her red-headed em-

poyer. "He doesn't want you to call him. He just wants you to get over there before midnight."

Smoke wreathed from Shayne's nostrils and the irritating grin remained on his rugged face. "Tell him to go jump in the ocean," he said pleasantly.

"Michael, if you don't . . ." Lucy gritted her teeth and turned back, uncovered the phone to say, "Yes, Mr. Wilde. Mr. Shayne will be delighted. Suite Six forty-two? He'll be there." She slammed the instrument down and stood up to confront Shayne defiantly.

"Mike, I'll never, *never* forgive you if you don't even go over to see what Mr. Wilde wants. Maybe . . . I could even meet him in person, if he retains you."

Shayne's grin faded slowly, to be replaced by a baffled expression. "I never knew *you* were like that, Lucy. My God! Wilde is nothing but—"

"Nothing but the most important and best-loved television personality in the country," she interrupted, bitingly. "That's all he is. Every girl I know would gladly give her right arm to meet him. That's all!"

Shayne said, "I'll be triple-damned." He clawed strong fingers through his coarse red hair, shaking his head in perplexity. "I never thought—"

"You just never think, period!" she interrupted again, more violently. "Well, I'm a female hu-

man being even if you don't realize it, Michael Shayne. If you don't go over to the White Sapphire Hotel tonight I'll never speak to you again in my life."

Shayne grinned again, this time with real mirth. He straightened his tall frame and leaned over the railing to crook his forefinger beneath Lucy's firm chin.

"The White Sapphire it is, angel. Shall I bring you his autograph?"

"You can tell him I'm one of his greatest fans and am dying to meet him," she responded promptly. "I do hope it'll be a long assignment."

Shayne shrugged and said, "Relax, Lucy. I'll go. Now, let's forget about Homer Wilde and get to work." But strangely enough, as the day went on, the detective found it difficult to keep Wilde out of his thoughts. He had never seen the television performer because he didn't even own a set, but he knew who Homer Wilde was, of course.

No one who read a newspaper could fail to know something about him—especially in Miami, where the star broadcast his nationwide shows several times during each winter season.

But he didn't know what to expect when he entered the Miami Beach hotel suite at five minutes past midnight, though it certainly wasn't what he found on the other side of the door—a

short, slender, curly-haired man with an engaging awkwardness of gesture and a face whose normal night club pallor was masked by a blistering red sunburn.

He gripped Shayne's hand firmly and lowered long lashes over his eyes with an odd, self-conscious coyness as he exclaimed. "This is simply great of you, Shayne. It's Mike, isn't it? I know all about you, Mike. Read every one of those excellent books your friend Halliday writes about your cases. Great stuff. Say, now . . ." Stepping back to look up appreciatively at the rangy redhead, "How'd you like to appear as a guest on my show next week in New York, Mike? You'd kill the people. You'd really be a natural. How about it?"

Shayne shook his head and said, "Sorry, fellow. You stick to your last, and I'll stick to mine." His voice hardened. "That isn't why you got me over here, is it?"

"As a matter of fact—no. It struck me just now when I got a look at you." Wilde turned and strode up and down the thick carpet, thrusting hands deep into the pockets of his cream-colored slacks.

"I'm in a jam, Mike. My business manager is missing. Ben Felton. Been with me for years. Just disappeared into the blue. You got to find him quick."

Shayne shrugged and moved

over to a deep chair and sank into it while Wilde continued to stride up and down nervously. "Better try the police. They've got the organization and it won't cost you anything."

"Damn the cost! No, I can't have the police in this, Mike. No publicity, see? If a word of this leaked to wrong people all hell would be on fire. Maybe you've read about this dinosaur deal I'm working on to set up a hotel syndicate here in the Beach. There's been a lot of stuff in the papers . . ." He removed one hand from his pocket and waved it vaguely, as a seal might wave a flipper.

Shayne shook his red head and said, "No. I carefully avoid reading any of that crap they print about TV big-shots. What's a hotel deal got to do with it?"

Wilde stopped in mid-stride with a pained expression on his beet-red face. "You don't read . . . ?" Then he shrugged manfully.

"But I'm sure my secretary can fill me in. She's a terrific fan of yours."

"Is, eh?" Wilde looked deprecatorily pleased. "Perhaps she'd like a personally-autographed picture."

"I'm sure she would," Shayne said wearily. "Look. You were hot about me getting over here tonight. So I'm here. So what's the pitch?"

"You've got to find Ben Felton. This twenty-million-dollar deal is hanging fire until I get his signature on some papers. And it won't hang fire much longer. I think the bastard ran out just to queer the whole pitch. He doesn't like it, see? He argued with me about going into it until I put my foot down and reminded him it was my own goddamned money. Then he disappeared. Find him."

Shayne said mildly, "That's not much to go on. If he's hiding out . . ."

"I don't know whether he is or isn't," Wilde snapped. "Frankly, I'd just as soon you turned up his corpse as not. But I've got to know, so I can get on with the deal one way or another. Cottrell's pressing me hard to finalize the thing."

Shayne sat up a little straighter and his left thumb and forefinger tugged at the lobe of his ear. "Would that be Copey Cottrell?"

"That's right. The big hotel tycoon from Las Vegas."

'Hotel tycoon' was a new way of describing Copey Cottrell, Shayne thought. In his book, Copey was a vicious racketeer who had victimized Nevada businessmen for too many years, and the thought of him infiltrating Miami Beach, with his pressure and trigger boys and his sleek, streamlined modern racketeering methods, was nauseating to the detective.

"Here's a publicity still of Felton." Wilde held out a glossy print. It showed a lean, lined, weary face beneath straight black hair lashed with grey at the temples. "All my people are good news copy. You can get the rest of the dope on Felton two doors down the hall. We're using this whole half of the floor for office space during my broadcasts here at the Beach. Ask for Pinky Reach." He paused, murmured, "Beach—Reach," and chuckled to himself. "I'd take you down myself, but I've got to get out to Eglin Field early tomorrow A.M."

As if on signal, an inner door opened into the large sitting room and one of Wilde's myriad pre-occupations strolled into the room. This one was a willowy brunette, wearing russet slacks and an eye-catching halter of the same color. She undulated languidly close to Homer, regarding the redhead with a speculative, heavy-lidded glance, and said throatily, "I'm sorry, Colonel—I didn't know you had anyone here."

"Colonel?" Shayne echoed in mild surprise. "Reserve?"

Homer Wilde flicked lint from his sleeve with a modesty as nonexistent as the imaginary speck of white on his clothing. "Oh," he said, "the boys up in Washington threw me a bone for entertaining the fellows overseas."

He chuckled again and reached lazily for the girl, drawing her

casually into the circle of his arm. "Honey," he said, "you better start watching your step. I just put Mike Shayne on the payroll. Mike, meet Monica Mallon, the purtiest little thrush this side of the Black Hills. You know, they always told me there was gold in them thar mountains."

"Mike Shayne?" The girl's lustrous dark eyes widened. "The famous private detective? Just to check up on *me*?"

Homer guffawed and squeezed Monica while he winked at Shayne. "Among other things, honey. Don't worry, chick—I've hired Mike to find Ben." And, his mirth falling away, "That reminds me, Mike—hadn't you better get cracking?"

There was, to Shayne, a distinctly unhealthy aura about the whole Wilde setup as he had seen it thus far—a definite sense of wheels within wheels, of things-aren't-what-they-seem. He said bluntly, "I'm not on your payroll yet, Wilde. I don't like the smell of this job."

Homer Wilde's mouth opened. His expression moved swiftly from disbelief, to alarm, to entreaty. For a moment, the redhead feared he was going to burst into tears. "But, Mike," he wailed, "I *need* you! I can give you more of my time as soon as I get my writers gassed up and going on next week's show in New York. Tonight's show really broke

my blisters. These Miami broadcasts are always brutal. But if you'll only start looking for Ben Felton now . . ."

He paused, then went on with, "It's this way, Mike. Ben walked out of this hotel yesterday morning and vanished into thin air. He didn't even leave a note, he hasn't called, he hasn't wired—and I've never been out of touch with the guy more than an hour or two at a time in over ten years. Now, of all times, when I need him more—"

Shayne grinned crookedly. "You *really* want him found?" he asked. "If you do, the police are your best bet. I'm not your boy."

"But, Mike," said Homer, "five hundred a day, plus expenses, and a bonus if—"

"Just about what you pay your office boys in TV, isn't it?" said the redhead. "You can take your job and shove it!"

As Mike strode to the elevator, a pale, weedy young man passed him, going toward Wilde's suite. Shayne, still amused at memory of Wilde's astonishment, scarcely noticed the young man's stare. He drove back to his apartment in a glow of smug self-satisfaction.

II

UPON SHAYNE'S arrival at his office the next morning, Lucy gave him one look and cried, almost tearfully, "Mike! You in-

sulted him—I just know you did. I've seen that look in your eye before, and—”

“What's it like, Angel?”

“It's mean, and sort of conceited,” she said. “If I—”

Mercifully, the telephone rang. Lucy grabbed it and said, “Michael Shayne's office. Just a moment, I'll see.” She turned back to Shayne. “It's a Mr. Harry Tyndale calling from New York. He says he—”

“Well, I'll be . . .” Shayne cut her off and took the phone.

“Thank God I caught you!” came the hearty, familiar voice. “Mike, you've got to get up here right away. There's a one-o'clock plane. I'll have you met at La Guardia. I can't talk over the phone, Mike, but it's a real jam—a rough one.”

Shayne looked at the clock on the wall. It was ten twenty-eight. He said, “I'll be on the one o'clock, Harry.”

Harry Tyndale was one of the nicest guys Shayne had ever met—and one of the richest. A rare combination. The redhead had pulled him out of an attempted shakedown the previous season in Miami and they had become firm friends after it was over. If Harry Tyndale said it was a “real jam,” Shayne knew it must be all of that.

Boarding the Super-Constellation two-and-a-half hours later, Shayne took a seat next to the

window. Just before they took off, a pale, weedy young man slid into the seat beside him and said, “Mike Shayne, isn't it? I'm Greg Jarvis, part of Homer Wilde's zoo. Didn't I see you leaving his suite last night?”

“Maybe.” Shayne was none too pleased. A private detective, unlike a TV star, is not pleased with a fame that makes his face known to too many people. But it took more than curtness to check Jarvis' garrulity.

“I'm one of the writers,” he gabbled, “and, brother, is *that* a rugged assignment! Homer is Nero and Simon Legree rolled into one large, economy-sized package.”

He launched into an eloquent dissertation on the obnoxious professional character and obscene personal habits of his employer. Shayne listened fitfully, when he wasn't almost dozing, until, without warning, something happened that caused him to forget Homer Wilde and his companion's complaints alike.

A jet-plane came blasting out of a cloudbank, directly in front of them, less than a mile ahead. Shayne barely heard Jarvis stop in mid-sentence to utter a terrified, “*Jesus Christ!*”

With the planes approaching one another at a rate exceeding the speed of sound, there were but fractions of a second in which to prepare for the deadly collision

that seemed inescapable. But somehow, in those fractions of splintered time, the jet slid downward, out of sight beneath them, and was gone.

Shayne slowly unclenched his fists and looked down at the red lines his nails had cut into his palms in so brief and deadly a moment. He again became conscious of Jarvis' voice in his left ear.

" . . . people wonder why we have trouble putting together sensible material for TV. Well, that stupid jet's the answer—just like this air-wagon we're riding in. The unities have been kicked all to hell and gone."

"What unities?" asked Shayne, wondering if Jarvis really had the faintest idea of how closely death had brushed them by.

"It goes back to the Greeks," said Jarvis condescendingly. "The Ancient Greeks, you know. They devised the unities and made them work better than any dramatic formula since. The gist of them was that nothing could happen onstage that could not happen in real life in the same space or the same length of time that the play took. You see what I'm getting at?"

"And now they're kicked all to hell and gone?" Shayne asked idly.

"You saw that jet-plane, didn't you? Beyond the speed of sound! Time and space are telescoped

like an accordion. Anything can happen anywhere, in any time," the writer complained and paused to brood on the injustices of science toward art.

At La Guardia, Shayne bade him a brusque farewell as he was greeted by a liveried chauffeur. The redhead was frankly glad to have seen the last of Homer Wilde's "zoo." He was whisked into the city and up to an immense suite on the top floor of the Wallston Plaza Towers, where he was met by Harry Tyndale in the huge master bedroom.

"Thank God you're here, Mike!" Tyndale was burly and grizzled, a deep-voiced bear of a man. At the moment, his heavy features showed unaccustomed lines of weariness and strain, and his voice throbbed with emotion and relief.

Shayne looked around the room and asked lightly, "What's up, Harry—corpse under the bed?"

"Not quite, Mike," Tyndale took him by the elbow and led him across the room to open a door leading into a bathroom—a silver-and-marble bathroom with a sunken tub big enough to float an outboard motorboat. Only there wasn't a boat in the bathtub . . .

Instead, Shayne stood staring down at the fully-clothed body of a dead man. A small man, stretched out neatly in the tub with his left temple smashed.

There was a livid bruise on his jaw, and a smear of blood on one of the silver fittings indicated that he might have been slugged on the chin and accidentally suffered the fatal wound in falling.

But what interested Shayne most at the moment was the dead man's face. It was lined, well-worn by life, and his dead eyes stared up at the detective as though saying mockingly, "So you finally found me, eh? Even after turning down the job of looking for me."

Shayne had found him. The dead man was Ben Felton, mysteriously missing from Miami.

Shayne straightened and backed out of the bathroom. Tyndale met him outside the doorway with a goblet half-full of Napoleon cognac.

Shayne drank half of it and demanded harshly, "How did he get there?"

Tyndale opened his manicured, muscular hands. "That's the hell of it!" he said. "I don't know."

"Come off it, Harry," Shayne told him. "You got me here. You know me. *Now talk!*" The last two words were a whiplash.

Harry Tyndale's face reddened—he was not a man accustomed to taking orders from anyone. He said, "Goddam it, Mike, *I don't know!* I've sunk a small mint in a new color photo-printing process that will revolutionize the field, but I've got other businesses

to feed, and my hotels are in trouble. I need every bit of good will and publicity I can get. My public relations counsel said, 'Toss a party . . . a big one.'

"So I did. Last night. I opened up the whole suite and had a hell of a mob milling around all night. In the middle of the morning I came in here and flopped on the bed and passed out. Never did such a thing before in my life. I have a good head for liquor. I woke with a lousy headache . . . just as if I'd had a Mickey Finn . . . and there he was. Some of the guests were still in the other rooms tanking up. I haven't dared leave here after finding him. I phoned you, and I've been sweating it out every since."

"What do you expect me to do, Harry?" Shayne asked quietly. He was convinced Harry Tyndale was telling the truth.

"I don't know," said Tyndale wearily, leaning against the foot of one of the twin beds. "If this gets out, and there's a big smell, it will ruin me. I'm way overextended until this photo thing is launched. But get me out of this, and you can name your own ticket."

"You should have called the cops and leveled," the redhead told him somberly. "Now you're in trouble anyway."

"I'm not a complete idiot!" Tyndale's nerves, close to the snapping point, caused him briefly to lose

self-control. "Don't you think I know that? But I didn't dare. I thought, that is, I hoped . . ."

"You hoped a character named Shayne, who got a broad off your neck in Miami last winter, could get a corpse out of your bathtub today," growled the detective. "Dammit, Harry, I wouldn't even try to do a thing like this on my own home grounds. And here in New York . . ." He paused to tug at the lobe of his left ear. "Tell me something, Harry. Have there been any TV personalities here? Actors, actresses, anybody like that?"

"Not that I know of—I didn't invite any," said Tyndale, puzzled. "This was a business party. There are women, sure—what's a party without 'em? You know the type—advertising girls, models, maybe an actress or two. This is a big wingding. But I wouldn't know a TV personality if I saw one—unless it was a newscaster or sports commentator. They're all I ever look at on TV."

He was interrupted by the opening of the door that led to the rest of the suite. Sounds of music and laughter entered, as did a beautifully stacked blonde in a green suit that matched her eyes, a blonde who managed to be attractive even though she was obviously a bit unsteady on her feet.

"Hi, yuall," she said in honeyed accents as Southern as fried chicken and hush-puppies.

"What do *you* want?" Tyndale snapped at her.

"Shugah, ah'm jus' not sure." Her green eyes ranged from Tyndale's defiant bulk to the long lean, muscular detective. "It jus' *cood* be, ah wan' somethin' lak him." She pointed a vermillion-tipped forefinger directly at Shayne.

"Later, honey, I'll buy you a dozen like him," said Tyndale. Moving into action, he propelled her gallantly but firmly outside and closed the door behind her. Turning to the redhead, he mopped a suddenly streaming brow and said, "That's about the sixth time she's come barging in here since I found that—*thing*. You see why I don't dare leave the room."

Shayne suppressed a grin. But the girl bothered him almost as much as Ben Felton's corpse, lying in the bathtub just beyond a thin wood door. Whatever Ben Felton had been, he was no longer. Whatever harm his body could do would be involuntary as far as he was concerned. But this green-eyed blonde—Shayne felt certain, from the wariness of her glance, that she had been sober. He doubted she was a genuine blonde. He was sure she was not a true Southerner. No Southerner ever said *cood* for *could*.

"Anybody else been in here today?" he asked.

"A few strays—but none as

often as that one. What a *mess!*"

"How come your hotels are in trouble while you're all tied up launching this new gizmo? I thought you, of all people, knew how to protect your rear."

"I thought so, too," said the millionaire wretchedly. "It wouldn't have happened if a bunch of gang-backed sharks from Las Vegas hadn't picked this moment to move in on me. When operations get as large as mine, there are bound to be leaks. You can't count on one hundred percent loyalty—not from humans, anyway. The sharks have been giving me the full treatment, all the way from stock raids to bedbugs."

"Who's behind it?" Shayne asked warily.

"Ever hear of a smooth-talking, good-looking, dirty-minded, snake-moraled, twenty-nine karat rat name Copey Cottrell?" Tyndale asked. "He's a no-good, underworld bastard, one of the Buggsy Siegal kind who can curl a pinkie around a teacup with an archduchess and beat up a hold-out whore on his string with a baseball bat half an hour later. Maybe you didn't know this, Mike, but I picked up the White Sapphire, in Miami Beach, three months ago. Seems, by their lights, I made a mistake. Seems they'd set their sights on it. So . . ." Again he spread his arms.

Shayne nodded. "I had no idea you were in the White Sapphire

mess," he said. He was beginning to see why Ben Felton should have turned up in Harry Tyndale's Suite. "Harry, if I were you, I'd go hunting for that leak with a monkey wrench."

"Don't worry," said Tyndale. "I'm working on that. And don't worry about my handling Copey Cottrell and all his nasty little men—I've been in dirty fights before. What worries me is that . . ." He nodded again toward the bathroom door.

"It damned well ought to worry you," said Shayne. "It worries the hell out of *me* and *I* had nothing to do with it."

"You never saw the guy before, did you?" It was a forlorn-hope question.

"Nope," replied the redhead truthfully. He paused to glance at his watch as the last pieces of a hare-brained, impossible plan fell together. "Have somebody get a small trunk—one of those steel foot-lockers they use in the army, with a grip on it. Have him get it here quick. I've got to be on the dinner plane for Miami tonight."

Harry Tyndale looked as if he couldn't quite believe it. His deep voice was a whisper as he asked, "Mike, what are you going to do?"

"Harry," the detective told him, "the less you know about it, the better. If I pull it off, you'll be getting my bill—a whopper. If I don't, it will cost you a lot more in lawyer's fees. Now, get going,

or we're both up the creek without a paddle between us."

Harry got going. The trunk was ordered, the reservations made, the chauffeur called for before Shayne had time to finish another drink. Shayne sipped it, rather than gulped it, wondering if he had gone out of his mind. He was used to taking long chances, to calculated risks. He was used to getting away with them. But to fly Ben Felton's corpse back to Miami in a foot-locker and dump him in Homer Wilde's lap . . .

He could still hear the television star's musical voice saying, "I'd just as soon you'd turn up his corpse as not."

If the redhead pulled it off, Homer was going to get his corpse.

When the locker arrived, Harry Tyndale locked the room doors. Then, for twelve minutes, he and Shayne were grimly busy. By the time they were through and had washed their hands, the redhead had acquired a sympathy for trunk murderers he had never thought would be his. If the deceased had not been such a small man . . . Shayne poured himself a drink, told Tyndale to have his men take the trunk down to the waiting car, then poured a half-tumbler for a newly grey-faced Tyndale. —

"Okay, Harry, now take a reef in yourself and hope for the best."

"Thanks, Mike." Tyndale's handclasp was fervent.

"It's not over yet," the redhead

told him. "Keep your fingers crossed."

III

SHAYNE MADE the waiting Super-Constellation with minutes to spare. He had to fork over an extra thirty dollars for overweight luggage and was again grateful that the late Ben Felton had been a small man. To say that he sweated the foot-locker through the weighing-in process was enormous understatement.

If anything went wrong—and he could think of half-a-hundred possibilities without stretching his imagination—it meant curtains for Michael Shayne, to say nothing of Harry Tyndale. But once Harry had called Shayne instead of the New York police, there was little else either of them *could* do.

Even if he got his strange cargo to Miami intact, there remained the little matter of arranging to plant it where it could do the most good for the team of Tyndale and Shayne—and the most damage to Copey Cottrell and his gangsters.

Why had Felton vanished? Why had he sought to contact Harry Tyndale? Had he been killed to prevent that contact? On the surface, the answers to all three questions lay in exactly two words—Copey Cottrell. Shayne had heard people call Cottrell good-looking. The detective found his eyes on his own right hand, which had, without conscious direction, balled

itself into a fist. Perhaps, if Cot-trell weren't so pretty . . .

For the first time, the detective allowed himself to ponder the identity of Ben Felton's killer. At a jamboree like the one Harry Tyndale was throwing, it could have been almost anyone. But for once, the identity of a murderer was not of supreme importance in a murder case. It was what was done with the corpse that mattered to Shayne now.

"Penny foah yuah thoughts," said a rich, feminine Southern voice, almost in his ear.

Shayne's self-possession was not merely a matter of pride—it had been, in hundreds of instances, a matter of life-and-death necessity. The redhead relied on his disciplined ability to withstand the most sudden shocks and never turn a hair. But this time, it took all his self command.

"You again?" He stared coldly at the beautifully stacked green-eyed blonde he had last seen in Harry's bedroom.

"Yaaaas, little ol' me," she replied, pouting prettily. "Ah tol' yuah ah jess myught want something like li'l ol' yuah. Ah think it was right ryude of yuah to take off without so much as sayin' gude byah to li'l ol' me."

He grinned in spite of himself, just as the engines of the Super Constellation cut in, one by one. He said, raising his voice above their roar, "Well, I don't seem to

have got away with it—you're here."

There was no more talk until the takeoff. Then she said, "What was that yuah were tryin' to sayah?"

He said, amusement fading as he realized things had gone very wrong, "Cut the accent, honey-chil'. You're no more Southern than you were drunk back in Harry Tyndale's hotel room.

"My best friends never told me I could act," she said in a perfectly straight, rather pleasant Midwestern voice.

The damnable part of it, he thought, was that he rather liked this girl—or might have if she weren't such a dangerous unknown. At least, she represented more attractive company than Greg Jarvis, the writer, on the trip up, with his prattle of unities. Shayne took his time studying her, and she returned his gaze, point for point.

She was not quite as pretty as he remembered her—evidently, she was a girl who could project beauty without actually having it. She was also a little older—there were tiny hints of wrinkles around mouth and eyes that told the story. But there was disarming good humor in her not unhandsome face, and then that figure . . .

"Well?" she said. "Satisfied?"

He shook his head. "Far from it . . ." He raised his shaggy red brows a notch.

"Oh . . ." She understood the unspoken question. "My name's Carol Hale, and I'm not married."

He put it to her bluntly. "Carol Hale, why did you follow me aboard this plane from the hotel?"

The good humor became an afterglow, a memory, as she said with quiet determination, "Because, Michael Shayne, I wanted to know what you were doing with poor Ben Felton's body."

Shayne was stopped cold—but not by so much as the flicker of an eyelid did he reveal the fact. He allowed a look of surprise, of bewilderment, to spread over his ruggedly cast features. Perhaps this girl was a poor actor, but the redhead was a good one when he had to be.

He said, "One of us must be crazy."

Mercifully, Carol Hale kept her voice low. She said, "I went to Tyndale's suite with Ben this morning. He went into that master bedroom and told me to wait for him, he had someone to see. I waited—the whole day, and I couldn't find Ben. Then you came in, and hour or so ago, and went in there to talk with Tyndale. You won't deny that, I hope."

Shayne's answer was a shrug—there seemed nothing to say. The girl went on evenly with, "I decided to watch. You see, I knew who you were, though I didn't expect to see you in New York. I

used to spend some of my winters in Miami. I wondered why you were there, and I got afraid. Then I decided to keep an eye on the hall. There was another door from the hall to that bedroom. I saw them bring in the trunk. Then I saw them bring it out. A moment later, you followed. I followed you."

Shayne sighed and shook his head. "I'm afraid your imagination has caused you to take a trip for nothing—not that I'm not grateful for a charming, if somewhat zany, companion."

She shook her head, and her green eyes were like twin jewels—hard and cold. She said, "It won't do, Mike Shayne. Tyndale kept watch like a bulldog all morning on that room."

"If you were in there, you must know there wasn't a body there," the redhead told her with an air of patience. "Tyndale was waiting for me on a matter of business. As for the trunk, I'm taking some valuable papers back to Miami for him."

"Mike Shayne playing nurse-maid to a bunch of documents!"

"Why couldn't your friend—Ben What's-his-name—simply have ducked out of the bedroom into the hall and gone down in the elevator? He's probably back at the hotel right now, wondering what happened to you."

She shook her head. "Not Ben Felton," she said firmly. "Ben

wasn't that kind of a character. He'd have called me—if he was able to."

"Maybe he wasn't able to." The redhead was sparring desperately. The girl didn't know the corpse was in the foot-locker—but as long as she was with him, she was intensely dangerous. If she blew the whistle on him before he had a chance to reclaim the trunk . . .

"Maybe he wasn't," she said. "He told me the deal he was on could be dangerous—so dangerous he'd been keeping out of sight for seventy-two hours."

"Quite a story," said Shayne, feigning amusement. "And just what was your role in this dangerous deal, Miss Hale? You're not going to tell me your friend brought you along merely as window dressing—not that you wouldn't dress a window damned attractively."

"My role was—or is—very important," she replied serenely. "Incidentally, believe it or not, it was not the sort of part I enjoy playing. But when you set out to destroy a rat, you can't always name your poison."

Shayne shook his head, puzzled. "Somewhere away back there, you lost me. But, now that you're here, what's on the docket?"

Her eyes studied him again. "That," she said, "depends . . ."

It was exasperating. For the time being, there was nothing

Shayne could do. He jerked his head toward the window.

"Hell of a beautiful sunset out there," he said.

Carol Hale said, "Isn't it lovely!"

They dined on excellent fried chicken, placed before them on trays by the inevitable trim hostess. They talked—about plane travel, about Miami, about New York, about a score of irrelevant things. But they never returned to the subject of the late Ben Felton, and she never revealed the least thing about herself.

Whatever element she represented in the deadly business, she knew he had the foot-locker aboard the plane and she probably suspected what it contained. If she had actually been with Ben Felton at Tyndale's suite, it was unlikely she was working for what Shayne was beginning to think of as the other side. But he had only her word for all that.

There was no sense in trying to ditch her, once they landed, and walk away from the airport, leaving the trunk to be picked up later. He couldn't risk checking a murdered corpse in a trunk in the airport luggage room, and he felt certain Carol Hale would keep watch and discover any pickup he arranged. A girl who had come along this doggedly on a mere hunch wouldn't give up at that stage of the game.

There was only one thing to

do—play out the string, bluff all the way, and keep the girl with him. He shifted his head to look at her covertly. She was lying back in her seat now, eyes closed. She looked harmless and innocent as a—well, baby was not quite the word he had in mind. Quite unexpectedly, the redhead felt a pang of genuine regret that they had met under such circumstances. Otherwise . . .

The distant barricade of Miami Beach was ablaze with jewel-lights as the big Super-Constellation circled and came in for its landing. A glance at his watch told Shayne they were on time. He stirred, and she yawned dimpling prettily. He said, "Someone meeting you?"

She shook her head, warily.

He added, "I suppose you'll want to stand by while I claim the foot-locker?"

Her answer was, "What else? And if you make one false step, Mike Shayne, I'll call the cops so fast you'll never know what—"

"You will?" Something in his voice checked her.

They were standing, side by side, at the luggage-claiming counter, when Shayne, after a quick glance around said, in a low voice, "Looks as if you won't have to call the cops after all, you double-crossing little"

She said, "What are you. . . ?" And then quick comprehension flashed into her alert green eyes. "It wasn't me," she whispered.

Then, more loudly, "Thanks, Mike, but I can manage by myself. There are plenty of porters here. It was really very kind of you." Deftly, she took the claim-check from his fingers. "Good night, Mike, it's been fun. Hope I see you around."

"Lots of fun," he said grimly. "And more to come. 'Night, Carol."

The redhead tipped his hat and walked away—almost into the arms of an enormous plainclothesman, who was making his way slowly, purposefully, toward them through the small press of porters and passengers and their welcoming friends.

Mike said, "Hello, Len—what are you doing here?"

Len Sturgis, one of the ablest as well as the largest detectives on Chief Will Gentry's Miami Police Force, eyed Shayne distrustfully. "How about you?" he asked. "Why don't you tell your friends when you take a trip to New York? We miss you around here, fellow."

Shayne was in no mood to endure heavy-handed humor. He said, "Two reasons, Len. One, I'm a licensed private detective, and my business is strictly between my clients and me. Two, I don't need to tell you characters what I do—you seem to find it out quick enough anyway. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing special," said Sturgis,

looking hurt. "How was the big city, Mike?"

Shayne wanted nothing more at the moment than to get rid of the man. Out of the corner of one eye, he could see Carol Hale sailing serenely toward the cab-stand outside, following a porter who was trundling a pile of bags of various shapes and sizes, among them the brown steel foot-locker that contained the mortal remains of Ben Felton.

But Shayne couldn't break away now. He knew Len Sturgis was at the airport in response to a tip, and he knew the detective knew Shayne knew it. Cursing Harry Tyndale and the leak in his inner staff, Shayne tried to think of a way out.

Sturgis prompted him, "No luggage, Mike?"

Shayne took the cue. "Just a one-day trip. I went up on the one o'clock. Friend of mine needed a little help."

Sturgis regarded Shayne with an oh-yeah? look, but said, "Well, I guess there's nothing much doing here. Care for a lift to town?"

"Thanks, Len, but I left my own car in the parking lot outside." Shayne headed for the exit the girl had used.

But he was too late.

She had vanished . . .

IV

IT WAS NEARLY four o'clock the next afternoon when Shayne

reached his office. Lucy was in a state. "*Mikel!*" she cried. "I've been half out of my mind! You never called me from New York, and I didn't know what was going on. Homer Wilde has been going crazy, too. He's been calling up, almost every since you left. He told me to have you call him the moment you got in."

The redhead grinned as he skimmed his hat toward the rack. "Your idol will have to wait a few minutes longer," he said. His grin faded as he briefed Lucy on the events of the past twenty-four hours. "So there it is." He tugged at his left earlobe. "Somewhere in this city is a woman who calls herself Carol Hale. And with her, unless she's got rid of it already, is a small trunk containing the body of Ben Felton. I've been knocking myself out all day trying to find her. Not a trace, not a clue . . ." He sighed.

There was a glint of wry amusement in Lucy's brown eyes. "Mike, the damnedest things happen to you!" she said. Then, growing serious, "You say this woman—Carol Hill—was about my height, has a good figure, might be around thirty, with green eyes, and uses an atrocious Southern accent?" Lucy's own soft Southern voice flowed smooth as corn syrup.

"That's about it. Why? Any ideas?" The redhead was pacing the floor.

"And she's a blonde?" Lucy sounded disbelieving.

"She was blonde yesterday," he replied.

"I'd give a dozen pairs of good nylons just to have one good look at her," Lucy said meditatively.

Shayne stopped pacing. "What's on your mind?"

She hesitated briefly. "In the early days, when he was building his popularity, Homer Wilde had a girl in his show called Jeanie Williams. She couldn't sing very well, and she couldn't dance a lick, and, of course, she didn't have to act. She wasn't exactly pretty, but she was nice looking and a marvelous figure.

"I liked her, and so did a lot of people. There used to be gossip about her being Homer's girl-friend. Oh—I remember, he used to kid her about her green eyes. You know, Mike, jealous monster and all that. Then, about three years ago, he dropped her flat."

"Not exactly a novelty where Homer's concerned from what I've been hearing," Shayne told her. "You think my Carol Hale sounds like Homer's Jeanie Williams?"

"Except for the blonde hair," said Lucy. "Listen, Mike, suppose she *has* something on Homer, and suppose Ben Felton went to New York and took her to Harry Tynale so he could use her evidence, or whatever it is, against Copey Cottrell . . ."

"I'm way ahead of you, Lucy," said Shayne, quietly. "Now all we have to do is find Carol-Jeanie and Ben's body. And after that . . ."

The phone rang. Lucy's brisk, "Michael Shayne's office," cut him short. "Just a moment, I'll see." She looked up at Shayne and whispered, "Homer Wilde, again."

Shayne took the phone grimly and said, "Hello, Wilde, what's on your mind?"

"I've got to see you, Shayne. You can write your own ticket. Any fee you name. Can you come over to the White Sapphire right away?"

"I'll be there." Shayne's eyes were bleak as he put down the phone.

Driving over the Causeway to the Beach, Shayne wondered if Homer had any idea that Ben Felton was dead. Surely he couldn't know that Shayne had found the body, brought it to Miami and lost it again . . .

Wilde was in his hotel bedroom, sitting beside the window looking out at the waters of the bay, silvered by the pre-twilight. The lush Monica Mallon was extended languorously on a chaise longue. She wore dinner pajamas of chartreuse satin, and flaunted a jade cigarette holder. Homer spoke as if she were not there.

"Look, Shayne," he said wearily without rising. "You've got me over a barrel. We're leaving for

New York tonight at three A. M. I've got to find Ben before we go, and you're the only man who can do it. He must be somewhere here in Miami. If you find him before we take off, I'll give you a blank check. You can fill in the amount yourself."

"Fair enough." Shayne looked at his watch. "I'll call you before midnight."

"Great!" There was relief in Homer's voice. "And I have a better idea. Come to our farewell party. It starts around midnight in the ballroom here and we leave for the airport at two-thirty A. M. Why don't you bring the charming Miss Hamilton? You say she's a fan of mine, and she certainly has a lovely telephone manner." This with a wink at Shayne, obviously designed to be seen by Monica. There was frost in her glance as Shayne departed.

This time, the redhead stopped at the other suite on the same floor which had been turned into a temporary publicity office.

There, Pinky Reach, the little man with large ears, wrestled with heavy leather-bound pressbooks until Shayne found what he wanted in an old one—a picture of Jeanie Williams. Her hair was brown and clubbed back with a bow. She looked much younger than the body-snatching blonde who had come back from New York with him, but she was unquestionably the same girl.

"Score one for Lucy," he told himself. Then, to Pinky Reach, "This girl—Jeanie Williams—looks like a nice kid."

"The most," was the prompt reply. "Though poor Jeanie's not exactly a kid. She was around when I was breaking in four-five years ago. A sweetheart. We all used to get sore when we thought of her in the hay with his nibs. You know all about that, of course." This with calm assumption that the redhead was up on all such gossip of the show. "Homer used her—and I mean *used* her—for about seven years on his way up. Then he junked her like an old car."

"Wonder what's happened to her since," mused Shayne.

"Who knows?" This with a shrug. "Jeanie dropped from sight. But the story goes that Ben Felton went to the mat with the boss and made him pay off big. That's what started the trouble between them. Homer would have junked Ben, too, if he could, I'm told. Boy, did he boil!" A pause, then, "You picked up anything on Ben? It isn't like him to run out this way."

But Shayne was out of ear-shot by then. In the lobby, Shayne called his office. He told Lucy that she could go home now, and that she was invited to Homer Wilde's party.

He interrupted her cry of, "Oh, Mike. What shall I wear?" to tell her, a little curtly, that he would

pick her up some time before midnight, that by then, the case should be solved.

He drove back to his apartment, reasonably well satisfied. Lucy would be pleased at having guessed the identity of his plane companion correctly. And now, at least, Shayne knew whom he was looking for. Everything was neatly tied up except for three large questions. Where was Jeanie-Carol? Where was the body of Ben Felton? Who killed Ben?

He was humming, off-key, a little tune as he went up in the elevator to his apartment. The door was ajar. He paused on the threshold and saw two men sprawled comfortably in two of the easy chairs. They were obviously not the sort of persons to be stopped by a mere locked door.

One of them, a lean, young-old man with a violent sports shirt and a badly broken nose that marred a gutter-handsome face, rose languidly and said, "You Shayne? The boss wants to have a word with you."

"By all means." Shayne matched the mocking courtliness of the intruder. Then, turning to the other, a squat, ugly character with a prematurely bald head, "Are you the boss?"

"Is he kidding?" the squat one asked, getting to his feet. Like his taller companion, he wore a light-weight jacket over a loud, open-

collar shirt. The looseness of the jacket's fit did not conceal the pistol he carried in a shoulder-holster from Shayne's trained eyes.

"Shall we go?" said the taller hood politely.

They drove him, in a cream-and-blue convertible, to a palmetto-ringed, ultra-modern house that hugged the ground well beyond the mountain-range of hotels that give Miami Beach its spectacular skyline. Shayne was escorted to a luxurious living room and left there, under the guard of the stockier and stupider of the two hoodlums.

He did not wait long before a compactly built, strong-featured man, who might have been a well-conditioned forty, entered the room. He wore bathing trunks and a brief towelling jacket, and, in spite of the lateness of the hour, there were traces of sand on his chest and stomach. He nodded at Shayne and went to a well-stocked bar.

"Martel, isn't it, Mr. Shayne?" he asked.

"Right," said Shayne, studying Copey Cottrell. The man was coarsely handsome and blandly corrupt. He poured himself a vodka highball and brought Shayne brandy. The two hoodlums had withdrawn to the far end of the long room.

"I've been wanting to meet you," Cottrell said quietly, "ever since Homer tried to put you on

his payroll. At first, it didn't seem to me that you could do anything my boys couldn't do. But since yesterday, I've had to upgrade you."

"That's nice," said Shayne, amused by the affectation of urbanity.

"Mind you, Mr. Shayne," went on his host, "I was not in favor of having Felton killed. I deplore violence—it's much too costly a method of doing business. And Felton's death was by way of being an accident. My—associate—in New York lost his temper, which is regrettable—but not as regrettable as the fact that you brought the body back here with you. Ben Felton, found dead in Tyndale's hotel suite in New York is quite a different thing from Ben Felton liable to be found dead at any moment here in Miami. Under certain circumstances, it could be embarrassing. I'm sure you understand."

"Pray elucidate further," said the redhead.

For a moment, he thought Cottrell was going to blow his top. He reddened, all the way from his hair line to the top of his trunks, and his eyes flashed flame. But the flare was brief, and Cottrell did not speak until he had regained self-control. Then he said, in the same quiet tone, "It was my idea, when I was informed last night that you were flying south with the corpse, to have the

police take care of it for me. As a taxpayer, I believe in using public servants wherever possible."

He paused, a trifle smugly, then added, "But, in some way you managed to elude the excellent Chief Gentry's detective. This is exceedingly inconvenient. Mr. Shayne, I want that body, and I want it now."

"I'm sorry," said Shayne. "You can't have it."

Cottrell rose from the chair in which he had been sitting while he talked. Jiggling the ice in his glass, he said, "Naturally, I expected that answer. I'm a businessman, and I'm used to making deals. As I told you just now, I sincerely deplore violence. And I'm willing to pay for what I get. Why not? You took some long chances yesterday, but you got away with them. You have something I want. Therefore, I'm willing to pay. And whatever figure we reach will be given you in this room, in cash, once you have given me the information I want. You need not appear in it at all. My boys will take care of the—merchandise.

"What's more"—he paused again, delicately—"the Internal Revenue people won't hear a whisper about the transaction from me. You'll have five thousand dollars and be home free. How does it sound to you, Mr. Shayne?"

"It sounds absurd." Shayne drained his glass. "Even if I

wanted to accommodate you, I couldn't."

"Make it ten grand," said Cottrell softly. "Will that do it?"

"I'm afraid not," said Shayne. "You see—I haven't got the body, and *I don't know where it is!*"

"Harry Tyndale would be touched by your loyalty." Cottrell was beginning to turn pink again under his tan. "But I have been told you are a man of such ethics as your profession permits. You've just been hired by Homer Wilde to find Ben Felton. Are you going to fulfill that contract?"

Shayne grinned. "Maybe. But when I found the police waiting for me at the airport, I lost my luggage check. By the time I managed to get Len Sturgis off my back, somebody else must have found it and claimed the trunk."

"Who?"

Shayne shrugged. "I don't know."

"Perhaps we can stir up your brain cells a trifle." Cottrell looked past him and said, "All right, boys. But keep him alive."

Shayne whirled as they came in behind him. The taller hood was swinging a sap lightly, and the half-bald one was drawing a shoulder-holstered gun.

Shayne dropped his shoulder and lunged as he whirled. He caught the squatly one in the belly before he got his gun out, and they went to the floor together.

The gun skidded out of reach,

and the man was out cold on the floor. The sap caught Shayne a glancing blow on the side of the head as he came to his feet, and he closed in with the taller man, driving his knee upward into the groin.

The man went down with a thin scream, and Shayne whirled from him just in time to see Cottrell swinging the barrel of a gun viciously. It connected solidly with the base of Shayne's skull, and he went down and out into blackness . . .

V

WHEN SHAYNE returned to consciousness, his head throbbed with pain and the right side of his neck was stiff and sore. It was dark, and his hands were taped securely to his sides. His ankles, too, were tightly taped together.

He was lying on a bed, and there was a window through which he was able to see stars shining above the silhouettes of palmettoes. As memory came back to him, he became aware that he must have been stowed away in a bedroom of Copey Cottrell's mansion. He lay there, waiting for his vision to improve, trying to figure some way out. On the side of the room away from the window, he could see a narrow line of light—a closed door with illumination beyond.

Shayne swung his legs over the edge of the bed and struggled to

a sitting position. If it were a bedroom, he reasoned, there must be some sharp angle on which he could work the tape loose that bound his hands to his sides. Until he did that, he was helpless.

He had no way of measuring time, but it seemed to take hours before he finally located the corner of a dresser. It was too high, and he had to go down on his knees and work a drawer loose with his teeth. Then came the seemingly endless, task of working loose broad-banded adhesive tape, professionally applied. He could feel the skin of his right wrist give way before, at last, he managed to loosen the tape sufficiently to get his right hand free.

He was sitting on the floor, freeing his ankles, when he heard the sounds of footsteps approaching from beyond the door, then the remembered voice of the broken-nosed hood, saying, ". . . like tangling with a herd of elephants, Louis. My gut will be sore for a week. Better take a look and see if he's crooked or come to. The son of a bitch can't stay out forever."

When he opened the door, inward, Shayne was waiting beside it. As the mobster appeared in the rectangle of light, the redhead moved swiftly, plucking a heavy automatic from the man's shoulder holster before he could raise his arms to prevent the move. The man cried, "*Louis! Look—*"

He had no time to utter another sound. Shayne backhanded him full across the face with the gun and felt flesh and bone tear under the impact. Then he was in the hall, leaping over the falling body and laying the heavy pistol hard against the rocklike skull of the startled Louis. He paused only to strip Louis of his pistol before moving warily, angrily, along the corridor. He walked softly, on the balls of his feet, a gun in either hand, as he made his way out of the mansion. He did not see another living soul.

Outside, the cream-and-blue convertible still waited. The redhead slid behind the wheel, laying his arsenal on the seat beside him. He put the car in gear and got away from there fast. The rage within him was deep. By his watch, it was already past two in the morning, and he felt a sickening sense of time irreparably lost as he burned rubber toward the White Sapphire. He had to find Lucy, and he wanted to be in at the farewell party. There was a chance Lucy might have gone without him, and a possibility Copey Cottrell might be there.

He arrived as the party was breaking up. In one corner, an impromptu quartet was singing *Tamiami Trail* close to a long service bar, which gave evidence of having seen much service. Men and women, looking slightly the worse for wear, were gathered in

groups and clusters about the large private ballroom. There was a lot of Air Force brass in evidence.

The little publicity man with the large ears, waylaid him as he moved toward the other end of the room, searching for Lucy. Pinky Reach was a trifle unsteady on his feet and grinning amiably. He said, "You must be a whiz, Shayne. How come you're asking for Jeanie Williams' picture this afternoon? I saw Jeanie in the city this evening."

"Where?" the detective asked sharply.

"In town." The publicity man waved his glass vaguely. "She was with another dame—a real looker. They were coming out of a beauty shop. Antonelli, my assistant, was with me—he can tell you. Hey, Sammy."

Sam Antonelli ambled up and nodded when the publicity man repeated his question. "It was Jeanie, all right," he said solemnly. "Good old Jeanie. Talk about your dames."

"Some other time," said Shayne. "What did the girl with her look like?" He was getting a hunch, and the lobe of his left ear was itching.

"*Beautiful!*" said Pinky Reach rhapsodically. But, under deft prodding from Shayne, he managed to give a fairly accurate description of Lucy Hamilton. Then he said, mournfully. "Party's almost over. Got to get our

bags if we're gonna make Homer's special plane at three."

"That's right," said Antonelli solemnly. "S'long, Shayne."

They wandered away, leaving Shayne frowning. So Lucy had found Jeanie-Carol—that was one load off his mind. But he'd have given a case of brandy to know where the women were at that moment. His speculations were broken when Homer Wilde came out of another room, surrounded by a coterie of Air Force and other brass, among whom Shayne spotted Cottrell. He lifted a hand in salute and had the pleasure of seeing the underworld boss look briefly distressed at sight of him. "But not as distressed as you're going to look," he told himself grimly.

Homer spotted Shayne and came over to him, hiding his displeasure behind a mask of geniality. "I'd about given you up, Mike," he said. "And where's that pretty secretary of yours?"

Monica Mallon, looking sleek and deadly beautiful in a strapless gown of black sequins, slithered through the crowd and slipped a shapely arm inside Homer's elbow. "Perhaps your adoring little fan isn't quite so adoring as you thought, darling," she told Homer.

Homer ignored her and peered closely at the redhead. "Boy!" he said. "Whatever delayed you must have had claws. You look

as if you'd been in a battle royal."

"I was," Shayne snapped. "Ask Cottrell to tell you about it."

Homer, with a look of surprise, glanced at his partner, who shook his head slightly. Taking the cue, Homer raised his voice and said, "Come on! Everybody that's still here, come on out to the airport and see us off. There'll be champagne, and none of you free loaders will want to miss that." He moved on toward the exit.

Shayne found himself standing beside a trim, young Air Force brigadier, who shook his head and said to the detective, "I never thought I'd hear old Farquar"—indicating an older man with the three stars of a lieutenant general on his shoulder straps—"called a free-loader and smile. Confidentially, sometimes I think Homer's a bit rich for the Air Force's blood. Still, you've got to hand it to a guy who can put on a show the way he did last night and log three thousand miles of jet-flying before a late lunch the next day."

Following Homer, while the brigadier kept on talking, Shayne saw patterns resolve and reshape themselves in his mind's eye. He thought of an Air Force jet blasting out of a cloud bank and all but crashing into a north-bound Constellation as it left Miami—of Jarvis, the writer, complaining that modern scientific development had shattered the unities of the ancient Greek drama. For the

first time, what had been mere playwright's patter, took on new meaning.

He said, to the brigadier, "I had an idea Homer's reserve commission was strictly an honorary one."

"That's what we thought," was the reply, "until old Homer decided to make it for real. And once Homer makes up his mind . . ."

Shayne lost the brigadier and got into the back seat of one of a line of rented cars. A man got in beside him and said, "I was hoping you'd show up tonight, Mike. I've been wanting to have a talk with you. What held you up? Wilde told me he was expecting you."

It was Will Gentry, Miami Chief of Police, the redhead's old friend and occasional antagonist. Shayne said, "A character named Cottrell wanted the same answers you do, Will. And I couldn't give them to him because I didn't have them."

"So he held you?" Gentry asked the question lightly, but there was probing below the surface.

"He tried to," Shayne told him.

Gentry said, as they swung for the drive to the airport, "Well, after all, Cottrell's a newcomer around here . . . Those questions Cottrell asked you—think you've got the answers now?"

"Some of them," the redhead

replied slowly. "Not all—not yet."

"You know, Mike," Gentry mused, "you disappointed Len Sturgis last night at the airport. We didn't expect you to come in alone."

"I hated to disappoint Len," said Shayne.

"I'm sure you did."

A girl, in the front seat beside the driver, interrupted their colloquy by offering them drinks from a bottle she was carrying. Shayne was grateful for the interruption. It gave him a chance to work out his startling new theory of Ben Felton's death.

The champagne send-off was in full cry when they reached the airport. Shayne got out of the car and moved to the fringe of the celebration, following the revelers through the buildings, out to the ramps, where a big plane waited. He lost Gentry in the process, but he had not gone far when his sleeve was plucked and Lucy's voice said, "Mike! Thank God you're here!"

Shayne gave her a hug and she put her arms around his neck. He winced as she touched a bruise.

"You're hurt, Michael. What happened?"

"Not bad," he replied. "Couple of other people got hurt a lot worse. I hear you ran down Jeanie."

"She's over there—waiting," Lucy nodded toward a shadowy corner forty feet away.

"Waiting—for what?" asked Shayne.

"For Homer," said Lucy. "Mike, you have no idea of the deal he gave her. Ben Felton protected her for years, but now Ben's dead and . . ."

"I know," said Shayne. "Where's the trunk?"

"That's what she's waiting for," said Lucy. "After what happened to Felton, she's willing to confront Homer and implicate herself just to ruin him. She hates him, but she loves him. And she's *really* nice. Mike, you've got to do something before she . . ."

"Maybe I can," he said. "How'd you find her, Angel?"

Lucy's eyes glowed in the darkness. "You know that old story about the man who found the lost mule by pretending he was a mule and going where a mule would go? Well, I tried to think what a girl like Jeanie Williams would do if she were planning to confront a man like Homer. The answer was—a beauty parlor. A brown-haired girl would never want to show herself to her old lover as a phoney blonde. So I just went to the beauty parlor show people use in Miami, and there she was. I've been trying everywhere to find you, Mike. How was the party?"

"It was over when I got there," said Mike. "Look out!"

Homer Wilde had seen them. He was moving briskly toward them. Out of the building behind

him came a string of porters pushing luggage toward the waiting plane. Homer was effusive to Shayne's secretary.

"You let me down, baby," he complained, holding her hand in both of his. "I had a lot of things planned for you."

"I'll just *bet* you did!" The ever-watchful Monica appeared at Homer's side, breaking up the scene.

Homer laughed at her, and Lucy managed to get her hand free.

"There it is now, Mike!" she whispered, pointing at a load pushed by one of the porters. "She left it in the luggage room at the airport this evening, and got one of her old pals in the show to put it in with Homer's luggage when it got here tonight."

"Now I see what you mean by 'confront,'" Shayne whispered in return. "Try to keep her out of this."

"I will, Mike." Lucy slipped away in the shadows.

Homer's eyes were on Shayne. He said, "Well, what about Felton?"

"Your worries," said Mike, "are just about over. Or maybe they're just beginning." He moved toward the plane, calling, "Will—Will Gentry. Something funny here."

He reached the trunk and bent over it, as Will Gentry joined him.

He pointed to a small spot of rust on the foot-locker. "Looks like blood to me, Will. Better open this one up."

Gentry gave Shayne a long, level look. "I'd say it was rust," he said quietly, "But—under the circumstances . . ." The chief of police gave the order to open the trunk.

LATER, at Police Headquarters, Gentry said, "Hell, Mike, we've got Homer cold—motive, opportunity, even concealing and trying to remove the corpse. Cottrell is caught, too, as a material witness. He'll be bailed out, of course, but he'll have to testify or take a powder. You know how characters like him hate the limelight. Mike, you've done a good night's work."

He paused to fix the detective with a saturnine gaze, added, "Mind you, there are some elements I don't yet understand in this business. But the Air Force has asked me to soft-pedal investigation in certain directions. I'm not even going to ask you how you knew there was a body in that foot-locker, Mike . . ."

"Thanks, Will," said Shayne, reaching for his hat. "Maybe I'll tell you when you've got Homer put away for keeps."

Lucy and Jeanie Williams were waiting for Shayne at his apartment. Jeanie, much younger with brown hair, stood up with tears in

her eyes. "You did a wonderful thing, Mike Shayne, saving me from turning in a man I once loved. It would have exposed my whole sordid story to the tabloids."

He grinned. "I ought to thank you, Jeanie Williams, for snatching that body for me. Did you know Ben Felton was planning to have it out with Homer Wilde in Tyndale's suite yesterday morning?"

She shook her head. "Did Homer plan to kill Ben there?" Her anxiety was evident.

Shayne nodded. "That's why Homer tried to hire me to find Felton the night before he took off in an Air Force jet-plane for Mitchel Field. I was part of his alibi. The Air Force brass thought he was just a reserve officer getting in some flying time when and where he could. Actually, he wanted to stop Ben before Ben got to Harry Tyndale, and he thought that I and the jet-flight

together would give him an unbreakable alibi.

"Ben must have told Homer he was taking you to Tyndale's. When you were separated from Ben in the crowd left over from Harry's party, Ben met Homer and Homer took him into Harry's bedroom, knowing Harry would be dead to the world until noon after that drugged drink. Wilde hit Ben and killed him. Then he went back to Mitchel, where his plane had been fueled and flew back to Eglin in time for a late lunch—and damned near hit the plane I was in, leaving Miami on my way to help Harry.

"That writer, Greg Jarvis, was right. Supersonic jet-planes have messed up all the unities, to say nothing of the alibis. It's almost possible for a man to be in two places at once now, and that's going to make life a lot harder for detectives."

Shayne sighed and reached for the brandy.

DON'T FORGET . . .

NEXT MONTH MICHAEL SHAYNE

FACES HIS MOST BAFFLING CASE

THE BODY WENT TO BED

by BRETT HALLIDAY

CRAIG RICE

The little lawyer was suffering from humanity's most dangerous ailment—he was bored. Chicago was lamentably law-abiding, not even a blonde promised action. But then he met Sam the Finder and his brand new black eye, and before he could order another whiskey, Malone had bid farewell to . . .

The Quiet Life

THANK YOU very kindly, sir, I am honored," said John J. Malone, signaling the bartender. "Rye and a beer chaser, please." He turned around to thank the source of the unexpected invitation.

The voice had been smooth, mellifluous, even cultured. It had sounded as though it belonged to a Harvard educated judge, a British motion picture star, perhaps the model of distinction for a talking whiskey ad. However, the dulcet syllables were the property of a smallish, nondescript-looking man, slightly bald, with a fringe of greyish-brownish hair, pale blue eyes behind rimless glasses, and a prominent, pinkish nose. The smallish man's coat and pants didn't quite match, instead of a vest he wore a dingy brown buttoned sweater, and a faded knit scarf concealed whatever collar or tie he might have been wearing—if any. The drink-buyer was further adorned by a truly splendid black eye.

Malone recognized him imme-

dately as Sam "The Finder" Fliegle. The little lawyer held out a cordial hand in greeting. By way of conversation, he uttered a few routine pleasantries about the weather and the coming fights, and tactfully refrained from asking questions about the colorful optic. One of the many things he had learned, in long years of practicing criminal law in Chicago, was that a man's black eye was his own private business—also, that questions or comments concerning such a shaded lamp seldom created a friendly or pleasant atmosphere.

But Sam the Finder was not in a reticent mood. "Charlie Binkley gave it to me," he said, pointing to the royal purple orb. "He was trying to serve me with a paper."

Malone's eyebrows rose a half-inch. While Charlie Binkley was a most unpopular man, even for a process server, he had never been known as a belligerent one. Furthermore, whenever belligerence was involved, Charlie, like other

members of his profession, was usually on the receiving end.

"So," Sam the Finder said, "I'm going to need your services, Malone." He added, "This time Charlie has gone too far."

The little lawyer's eyebrows rose another half-inch at that one. Lawsuits were hardly what he expected from Sam Fliegle, not in such a case. A thorough going-over in an alley with brass knuckles and saps, yes—a hair-combing with a baseball bat, perhaps. Sam had just the boys who could tend to such chores. But a lawsuit—never. Sam the Finder just was not the type.

"I know what you're thinking," Sam the Finder said, in that shockingly beautiful voice. "I'm not going to sue him. Charlie will be taken care of, never fear, but not in the courts of law. I want your services for something else." He smiled, and Malone, for some reason, didn't entirely like the smile. Sam the Finder added, "Tomorrow morning, at your office?"

Malone nodded. A client was a client, especially just then. Not only were the John J. Malone finances rapidly plunging toward what threatened to be an all-time low, but life had been entirely too quiet of late. Besides, he liked the little man—even littler than himself.

"Tomorrow morning will be fine," he said.

Malone finished his drink and put the glass down on the bar. He was bored with the Blue Casino, had, in fact, been regretting the treachery of fate that had brought him there in the first place when Sam the Finder had appeared. He had come with a party of five, a party that included a tender-eyed, slender-thighed blonde from a new show in town. His head had buzzed with plans, and his spirit soared with expectations for turning it into a party of two as the evening went along.

Fate in the shape of one of his companions—male—had tricked him, and things hadn't worked out that way. Hence, a party of one and very tired of it, he had been making up his mind to abandon the Blue Casino for Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar, where at least he could be bored and lonely on the cuff.

Therefore, Malone said good-night to his new client and moved toward the door. Sam the Finder trailed along, saying, in his impeccable accents, "I'm leaving myself, Malone. Delighted to drop you wherever you're going."

Malone, too, was delighted. Outside, it was a dreary, dismal night. Indeed, even in good weather, he preferred to confine his pedestrian activities to crossing sidewalks.

In spite of Sam the Finder's Skid Row apparel, the car that

was brought around to the door by a uniformed chauffeur was a satisfactorily splendid black Cadillac limousine. Malone eyed it approvingly. This was the way he preferred to see his clients transported. He remembered, also with approval, that Sam the Finder was known to be anything but a miser. Certainly, Sam was not a poor man. His choice of clothing was therefore a matter of either preference or indifference. Malone considered it his client's own business, like the black eye, which almost matched the paint job on the Cadillac.

However, the eye became again the topic of conversation as the big car slid noiselessly away from the curb. "Charlie poked it with the papers he was trying to serve," Sam the Finder said. For the third time, Malone looked at him with mild surprise.

"He'd been chasing after me for two days, trying to serve me," Sam continued. "Finally, he decided to do it the easy way and came out to the house and rang the doorbell. I opened the peephole to see who was at the door. He got very smart indeed, rolled up the papers quick and shoved them through the peephole—right in my eye!"

"Legal service," Malone said. "The papers must touch the person of the party being served."

Sam the Finder flashed him a quick glance, then said, "The law

also states that the party serving the papers has to be able to depone, or testify, that they reached the right person. Which Charlie cannot do. I could see him, but he couldn't see me."

Malone thought that over, decided Sam the Finder was right. "What are you planning to do about it?" he asked.

"Nothing," Sam the Finder said. "That's the whole point. When the hearing comes up tomorrow, to decide whether or not Harry Brown got a bad deal when Mike Medinica sold him the All-Northwest Chicago Boxing and Wrestling Club, I'm not going to be present."

"Legally—" Malone began.

"Legally, Harry Brown can't prove a thing," Sam the Finder said. "I'd be out of Chicago right now, except that I've got a little business to tend to first." The big car slid to a stop in front of Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar. "I'll be in your office in the morning, and then I'm leaving on a business trip—a *long* business trip."

The shabby little man opened the Cadillac door and smiled amiably at Malone. "Don't worry," he said. "It's a simple little matter, easily handled. I just want to leave certain things in the hands of a lawyer when I go on that business trip."

Sam the Finder might at least have made it "good lawyer," Malone reflected wistfully. But he

managed to smile an equally amiable goodnight as his new client drove away. This was no time to argue with a client, new or otherwise. Besides, Sam the Finder was not a person to argue with at any time anyway.

Joe the Angel noted the size and splendor of the car that delivered Malone. He, too, smiled amiably and said nothing about the size of the bar bill.

"Sam the Finder," Malone said, saving Joe the Angel the trouble of a question. "Wants me to handle a little matter for him. I'll take rye."

"A big man," Joe the Angel said with a certain reverence.

Malone nodded gloomily, and sighed deeply over his whiskey. He was worse than bored, he was bored with being bored. The recent quietness of life, with its consequent, concomitant lack of clients and equally concomitant lack of funds, was getting on his nerves. Not so much the lack of funds—he was used to that problem and would inevitably find a way to meet it.

There was, for instance, a poker game tomorrow night at Judge Tournalchuk's duplex apartment that ought to help materially. It was the very quietness itself that bothered him. Malone to be happy, needed a certain amount of action around him.

He thought about Sam the Finder. A strange little man, and

Malone remarked as much to Joe the Angel. Joe the Angel went on polishing glasses and said, "My cousin Louie says Sam the Finder learned to talk so good from his father, a college teacher."

"Your cousin Louie should go soak his head," Malone said amiably.

It made, he thought, a pleasant story, that Sam the Finder's father had been a professor of English who discovered, during Prohibition, that bootlegging to his students offered far greater profits than guiding them through the intricacies of Henry James' subordinate clauses. Actually, Sam the Finder had been born back of the yards, just like John J. Malone.

He hated to disillusion Joe the Angel, but truth was truth—outside of a courtroom. He said, "Sam got hold of a correspondence course in better English on a bad debt, and didn't want to waste it. So he studied it himself, including the phonograph records."

Not, he reflected again happily, that the little man was a miser. Sam the Finder had a large, luxurious suburban home, as well as a huge country place in Wisconsin. His lovely young red-haired wife wore diamonds as good, and at least as large, as any lady in town. It was a known fact that there was not merely the one, but several Cadillacs. Sam dressed the way he did because he always had, and because his apparel had come

to carry, at least in the wearer's eye, a certain mark of distinction on a level trademarked by Brooks Brothers suits and Countess Marriages.

Malone was still meditating on Sam the Finder's personal life, habits and fortune, with a certain emphasis on the amount of the retainer he would probably get in the morning, when the telephone rang. The call was for Malone. The caller von Flanagan—a decidedly *anguished* Captain von Flanagan.

"Malone," he said in tones of pure desperation, "I'm in Harry Brown's apartment. Get over here right away. There's trouble."

Malone asked what kind of trouble.

"I can't tell you over the phone," von Flanagan replied curtly. Then, in a lower voice, "There's been a murder."

"Call the cops," Malone said with a certain irony.

Von Flanagan didn't appear to notice the thrust. He said earnestly, "I'm going to, soon as I hang up. Malone, I need you—now!"

Malone hung up, reflecting that things had come to a pretty pass when the head of the Homicide Bureau summoned a lawyer to the scene of a murder before he called the police. He inspected his wallet, borrowed an extra five from Joe the Angel for mad money, hailed a taxi and was on his way.

II

A POLICE CAR screamed up the street behind him as he crossed the sidewalk toward the unpretentious brick apartment building, but Malone beat the cops to the self-service elevator.

On a sudden thought, as he stepped out of the lift on the sixth floor, he left the door carefully disconnected. He didn't know what was going on, but it occurred to him that von Flanagan just might want a few minutes of privacy before the law—the rest of the law, Malone corrected himself—arrived on the scene.

The door to Harry Brown's luxurious apartment stood open. Charlie Binkley, the process server, lay dead on the floor, his head in a pool of blood and a bullet hole through his right eye.

Harry Brown sat in an easy chair, slumped down and looking dazed. Captain Daniel von Flanagan stood in the center of the room, looking frantic and rolling of eye.

"*Malone!*" von Flanagan gasped. "How is this going to look? I was *here!* When it happened! How is it going to look in the *papers*? What am I going to do?"

"What happened?" Malone asked.

"That's just it," said the Homicide chief desperately. "I don't know. Malone—"

"Shut up," the little lawyer said,

but pleasantly. "There isn't any time to talk." Or, it occurred to him, for thought either—though it didn't take much thinking to comprehend the uncomfortable nature of the spot the big police official was in. He asked, "Was your being here a factor in—"

"My being here had nothing to do with this," von Flanagan interrupted hastily. "Or with *him*." He pointed to the body.

Heavy footsteps sounded in the hall. "Don't say anything," Malone advised, fast and in a low voice. "You just got here in one hell of a hurry that's all. Any questions that come up right now—just tell them that *I* called you. We'll work the rest out later."

The look in von Flanagan's eyes went far beyond mere gratitude. It promised infinite favors for Malone, favors in times to come.

The heavy footsteps reached the door. A loud and angry voice wanted to know just who the hell had left the elevator door ajar and jammed the cage. For the moment it appeared, this was of greater import than Charlie Binkley's body on the floor.

No one admitted knowing anything about the elevator door, and the subject was dropped for the moment. The two policemen nodded respectfully to von Flanagan. They told him they'd gotten to the scene as quickly as they could, that the technical boys were on the way. They appeared to as-

sume that von Flanagan had been summoned independently after the killing, that he had promptly called headquarters, that Malone's presence was a matter for the captain's discretion.

For the time being, Harry Brown was the focus of attention. The dapper little man in the pinstriped suit sat nervously tapping a cigarette with his long, slender fingers, occasionally passing a hand over shiny black hair which Malone had always suspected was dyed. Harry appeared to be having difficulty finding the right words.

He finally got his story out. Charlie Binkley, he explained, had come to see him on a matter of private business. Under pressure, Harry admitted, that the "business" had to do with the hearing to be conducted on the morrow. He was anxious to learn whether or not certain papers had been served on one Samuel J. Fliegle. *What sort of papers?* A summons. *What sort of hearing on the morrow?* The hearing over the fraudulent sale of the All-Northwest Chicago Boxing and Wrestling Club. *And what did that have to do with murder?* Harry Brown grew a little irritable on that point.

"You stand here nagging," Harry Brown said, "and the guy who cut Charlie down may still be in the building. We—" with a quick look at the embarrassed von Flanagan—"that is, I chased after

him, but he got away down the stairs. Could be he's still around."

What did this vanished HE look like? Well, it had all happened pretty fast. But he had worn a tan overcoat and a dark hat. And he was tallish. Harry added, "I didn't see his face."

One of the policemen left to search the building, looking weary, doubtful and generally morose at his assignment. The other stayed on for the questioning, continuing to take notes while von Flanagan sat and occasionally wiped his brow.

"We'd finished talking," Harry Brown said. "I was over by the TV set and he was just about to go home. Somebody buzzed the buzzer. I said, 'See who it is, Charlie,' and he looked through the peeper. *Wham!* Somebody shot him right through the eye."

He dropped his unlighted cigarette, started to pick it up, took out another instead, continued with, "I ran across the room and opened the door. It took a few seconds to get it open, because I had to shove Charlie out of the way. I was just in time to see this character in the brown coat go down the stairs. I chased after him, but he had too big a lead. I tried to get the elevator but it was on another floor. By the time I got it, it was too late." He added, half-apologetically, "I guess I got excited."

The police officer muttered

something unkind about self-service elevators.

Did Harry Brown have a gun? He did. He produced it without protest to be taken for examination.

That was his whole story. Malone breathed a little easier and observed with wry amusement that von Flanagan did likewise. All the same, von Flanagan was on a hook. And, for that matter, come to think of it, so was John J. Malone.

It would be a simple matter to explain his session with Sam the Finder, who didn't want to appear at the hearing and had no desire for Charlie Binkley to swear—even without legal proof—that the papers had been served. It would be a simple matter for Malone to tell the story of the black eye, which was all too obviously direct inspiration for the method of Charlie Binkley's murder. This story, Malone was sure, Sam the Finder had hardly, under the circumstances, confided to anyone else. With these facts educed, and a pick-up order sent out for Sam the Finder, people were not going to ask embarrassing questions as to von Flanagan's presence on the scene of the crime.

Despite innumerable differences of opinion, von Flanagan had been Malone's friend since the homicide captain had been a rookie cop, and the famed criminal lawyer working his way

through night school by driving a cab. Now, von Flanagan was on a spot.

On the other hand, Sam the Finder was a client.

It was an ethical problem that could hardly be settled in the limited time at his immediate disposal. So Malone compromised.

He signaled von Flanagan with an eyebrow and managed to have a private word with him. "You can tell the press," he said, both confidently and confidently, "that you know the identity of the murderer, and that you'll have him in custody by noon tomorrow."

Von Flanagan's grey eyes lighted with hope. "You wouldn't fool me, Malone?" His voice was a plea.

"I'll deliver him myself," Malone said firmly. It was a promise, and they both knew it. Moreover, both men knew Malone made a habit of keeping his word. He added, "That's all I can tell you right now."

Not much—but it was enough. Von Flanagan breathed his relief. "Believe me, Malone, my being here didn't have anything to do with this," he said earnestly. "It was—well, a personal matter. I wanted to find out something."

"You don't have to tell me," Malone told him.

Von Flanagan ploughed ahead. "It don't matter—now. It's about this hearing deal. One of my in-laws has some dough tied up with

Mike Medinica and he got worried. He knew I knew Harry Brown, and he thought maybe I could ask a few questions—innocently—and find out if he stood to lose it."

Malone nodded sympathetically. Trust von Flanagan's in-laws to have money involved in a shady deal. He thought over what he knew of the All-Northwest Chicago Boxing and Wrestling Club—ANCBAWC for short—and its sale. Sam the Finder had set up the sale, from Mike Medinica to Harry Brown. Now, Harry Brown was howling that he'd been robbed, to the extent of a cool hundred grand in hard money, because certain stipulated concessions had not been delivered.

The concessions were supposed to represent various respectable and legal contracts. However, the private bark around town was that a considerable amount of fight fixing and protection was the real issue, promised by Mike Medinica through Sam the Finder, whose highly profitable profession consisted of setting up shady deals. These "concessions," the bark had it, had failed to materialize once the sale was completed.

Shooting little Charlie Binkley over the comparatively minor matter of Sam the Finder's appearance at the hearing seemed to Malone rather a drastic method of settling things. However, Sam

the Finder had been known to take drastic steps when sufficiently annoyed. The black eye caused by Charlie's novel delivery methods might be deemed sufficient annoyance, especially since Sam the Finder was also a proud man.

There was comparative calm in the apartment, a calm that Malone knew was unlikely to endure long. He took advantage of it to ask von Flanagan for further details of the events leading up to the shooting.

"Harry and I were talking," von Flanagan said. "I was just trying to find out if my cousin-in-law's dough was safe, Malone. Then this guy, Charlie Binkley, knocked. Harry Brown said it was a private matter, and would I mind waiting elsewhere. I said I wouldn't, and I was very happy to scram into the bedroom. I wouldn't want it to get around, Malone, that I was up here seeing Harry Brown. It wouldn't look too good. You know what I mean . . . ?"

The little lawyer nodded in perfect understanding.

"So I went into the bedroom. I was looking at a copy of an old *Confidential* when I heard the shot. Naturally, Malone, I put down the *Confidential* and looked out. I didn't exactly rush out, Malone, until I saw what was going on—I mean, what *had* been going on."

Malone said, "What *did* you see?"

"I see this guy, Charlie Binkley, dead, just like now. Harry Brown is running down the hall after some other guy, so I go along to help. But the other character, the one in the tan overcoat, gets away. So I come back and begin to worry about what to do. I tell Harry Brown to shut his trap about me being here, and think a little more. Then, I start calling you and got you at Joe the Angel's on the second try."

"A very wise move," Malone told him. He started to add, automatically, "Keep calm, and I'll do the talking." Then he remembered, just in time, who von Flanagan was. He substituted a hearty, "Don't worry, chum."

"Malone!" von Flanagan said anxiously, "You're sure—I mean, absolutely sure—you can deliver the killer by tomorrow noon?"

"I never felt so sure of anything in my entire life," Malone said. Curiously enough, he meant it.

The calm vanished, as Malone had expected, and confusion again took over with the arrival of more officialdom and the press. Malone stood silent on the sidelines, chewing on an unlighted cigar, while Harry Brown, still nervous, reenacted what had happened.

The little lawyer tagged along, half disinterestedly, while the police again searched the apartment building. Something was bothering him. Moreover, he couldn't put a mental finger on it, which made it

bother him the more. Perhaps, he told himself, it was the sense of responsibility toward an old friend that made the whole affair seem important out of all proportion to reality, and that was the only thing wrong. However, this line of reasoning didn't relieve his anxiety in the least.

III

FINALLY, the excitement was over. Harry Brown was taken to headquarters to sign his statement. The late Charlie Binkley was removed to the morgue. No one remained on the premises but a policeman assigned to guard the apartment overnight and Malone.

The little lawyer had declined von Flanagan's invitation to come along, along with offers of a ride downtown made by various friendly reporters. Nothing impelled him to stay save that vague sense of something wrong, plus an even more vague impulse to search the building on his own, an impulse he tried unsuccessfully to talk himself out of. Then there was an unpleasant prescience of impending trouble.

Eventually, Malone gave up the struggle and, beginning at the top of the building, worked his way down. The seven floors were exactly alike, composed of two apartments with a long, gloomy hall between, a flight of stairs, a trash drop and a mail drop.

Malone paused at Harry

Brown's apartment on the sixth floor to pass a pleasant word or two with Sergeant Zubich, the officer on duty, followed by a brief prowl around the murder premises which told him nothing except that Harry Brown lived exceedingly well, up to and including an assortment of girl friends with expensive tastes in what could best be termed leisure wear.

The basement was a gloomy hole, and by that time Malone was tired, thirsty, and thoroughly sick of the whole business. However, having progressed this far, he decided to take a final look around.

It was in the trash bin that at last he struck oil, in the form of a recently fired .32, almost completely concealed by the waste papers it had slipped through when it landed at the bottom of the trash chute. Malone picked it up gingerly with his handkerchief, looked at it thoughtfully, finally slipped it into his overcoat pocket.

Obviously, proper procedure was to take it straight down to von Flanagan's office. On the other hand, by this time, von Flanagan might very probably have closed up shop and gone home. However, the gun was highly important evidence and ought to be in the hands of the police.

But it was late—well after midnight—and Malone's sense of civic duty could be stretched only so far. Nor was it going to do any

harm to delay announcement of his discovery until after his conference in the morning with Sam the Finder.

Malone sighed, buttoned his conscience and overcoat tightly and walked up the basement stairs, pondering the matter of how the gun had gotten into the trash bin. Obviously, the fleeing man in the tan overcoat, hearing Harry Brown racing after him—Harry Brown, and then von Flanagan—had been moved to dispose of the gun in case he should be overtaken.

Malone decided that it was his own subconscious half-notice of the trash-chute drops in the hall that had caused his undefinable sense of worry. Or was it? Something else, something equally indefinable, still eluded and disturbed his usually imperturbable sense of well-being.

Oh well, he decided pragmatically, this too would come to him in time. Malone stood for a moment, shivering on the sidewalk in the damp, chill mist, wondering which direction along the dimly-lighted street would take him most rapidly to a telephone and a taxicab. He began to regret the professed rides he had spurned.

Then, miraculously, it appeared that he was going to get a ride after all. A big dark car slid up to the curb, and its door opened silently. Mike Medinica's voice said, "Get in, Malone."

Malone complied gratefully. Not only was he glad to get out of the damp chill, but a few words with big Mike Medinica seemed entirely in order. He stole a glance at the handsome blonde giant who sat relaxed behind the wheel. Mike was a free and easy spender, who dressed on the sharp and snappy side and was reported to be ardently pursued by whole regiments of females between the ages of six and sixty. *His occupation?* Malone supposed the word *promoter* would do as well as any.

The little lawyer sighed nostalgically. Things were different from back in the twenties. The big boys were getting refined. He preferred big shots who wore their true colors outside as well as in. But this, alas, was no longer the way of the world—or the underworld.

He leaned back, lit a fresh cigar, glanced out the window and exclaimed, "Hey! You're going the wrong way, Mike."

"No, I'm not," Mike Medinica said serenely.

"But I'm going downtown," said Malone.

"No, you're not," Mike Medinica told him. "You're going out to Sam the Finder's farm."

Malone thought that over and made no comment. There seemed none to make.

"Just to spend the day," Mike Medinica added persuasively.

The little lawyer protested

mildly. "That's—kidnapping," he said.

"Call a cop," Mike suggested. He sounded amused.

Malone thought that one over, too. There didn't seem to be any truly practical way of getting out of the car, either.

"Nothing personal," Mike Medinica said a mile or so further north.

"Now look here . . ." Malone began, a little feebly. He paused to consider, added, more feebly still, "You can't do this."

This time Mike Medinica chuckled. He said, "Sue me."

Malone was silent for another mile. "Understand," he said at last, "it's a lovely night for a drive, and all that. But, Mike, I've got an appointment with Sam the Finder himself, tomorrow morning at my office."

"Changed," said Mike Medinica, laconic as ever. "Sam's out at the farm now. Waiting for you."

"But . . ." Malone stopped. He had almost added that he also had an appointment with von Flanagan in the morning, to say nothing of his promise to produce Charlie Binkley's killer by noon—a promise that involved Sam the Finder. Mike Medinica seemed hardly the person to discuss this highly delicate matter with.

However, Sam the Finder was a reasonable man. Malone decided to wait and talk things over with him, get everything straightened

out—omitting all mention of the murder, of course—and then get back to town. As for transportation, he'd have to worry about that when the time came. Sam the Finder's farm was out near Libertyville. Malone hoped he had train fare on him. He wondered if Mike Medinica knew about the murder. He wondered, too, just how he was going to find this out in what had to be apparently casual conversation.

Finally, Malone decided that this was no time for small or other talk, and settled down to being merely miserable. The thin drizzle was still coming down, and Mike Medinica drove his big car carelessly over the slippery roads, without apparent concern for curves or traffic. Malone was tired, he was cross, and he was worried.

All in all, he was heartily relieved when Mike turned in through the ornate gateway that led to Sam the Finder's simple little twenty-two room country cottage. He felt even better when he was ushered into the cheerful warmth and light of the big living room by Olive Fliegle, Sam the Finder's highly ornamental red-haired wife.

Sam the Finder sat by a comfortably glowing fire, wearing an old-fashioned blanket bathrobe and a pair of carpet slippers. He didn't look downright grim, Malone reflected, merely a shade less genial than usual. But he rose to

greet Malone with a fine warmth of cordiality, bade him to let Olive hang up his hat and overcoat and showed him to the comfortable chair.

"Now listen, Sam," Malone began. He paused to rearrange his thoughts once more and reached in his pocket for a cigar.

Sam shoved a handsome humidor across the coffee table. "Be my guest," he said generously.

In more ways than one, Malone thought bitterly. He tried it again. "Sam, much as I'd enjoy staying overnight, I have a number of things to attend to in town, come morning."

Sam the Finder shrugged his shoulders and waved a careless hand. "Take care of them by telephone," he suggested. "Make all the calls you want. Long distance if you want to. Be my guest."

"But, Sam . . ." Malone managed, by the thinnest of margins to keep sheer desperation out of his voice.

"Make yourself at home. My house is yours." Sam the Finder remained inexorably expansive.

Olive smiled at Malone winsomely from her chair and, for a fleeting and tingling moment, Malone wondered exactly how far Sam intended his hospitality to go. Then he reminded himself that this was enforced hospitality, although the ugly fact had not actually been brought into the open—yet.

It was Mike Medinica who finally brought it to the surface, after a long and awkward silence. "We trust you, Malone," he said, by way of reassurance. "Hell, everybody trusts you. But right now, we don't want to take no chances. Sammy never should have told you how he got that black eye."

"A client's confidences are always sacred," Malone intoned stiffly, "no matter what their nature." That, he realized, went for the murder of Charlie Binkley, too, if the conversation touched that highly explosive matter. "So there's no real necessity for this . . ." He had been about to say, "outrage," but hastily changed it to, "invitation."

"Malone," said Mike Medinica "this is positively no reflection on your character in any way, and we do not want you to take it as such. But there is entirely too much money involved to take any chances that some damn fool thing might go wrong."

The little lawyer was, in a way, relieved that Mike had confined the reason for his genteel snatch to mere money.

"Besides which," the big promoter added, "there is the very likely possibility that if Sam the Finder should take the stand, certain little incidental items might be mentioned in the questioning, irregardless of the fact that Sam the Finder would naturally keep

his trap shut. Certain of the finer points of the deal might be brought to the public attention, points we consider are none of the public's damn business." Mike drew a long breath and smiled at Malone with revolting amiability.

Little incidental items, Malone thought, *certain of the finer points of the deal*—such as protection for fixed fights and vicious gambling activities. He wondered if Mike Medinica even knew what had happened to Charlie Binkley. In any event, John J. Malone wasn't going to be the one to bring up the subject.

"So," Sam the Finder put in, "tomorrow night, we will drive you back to town. In the meantime, enjoy yourself, Malone. Have yourself a ball."

It was no time for argument, Malone decided. Somehow he was going to have to get back to town by morning, but surely something would turn up. Something was going to have to. This was one time he couldn't afford to let down von Flanagan.

"It's not that we don't completely trust you," said Mike Medinica. "It's just that we wouldn't want to have anything happen to you. So we know you don't mind if one of us shares a room with you."

"Not at all." Malone lied valiantly, still hoping something would turn up. He decided to drop the subject and ride with the

punches for the time being. He glanced idly around the room. "Is that the peephole where you got the black eye, Sam?" he asked casually, looking at the heavy door.

Mike Medinica shook his blonde head. "It was in town, at Sam the Finder's penthouse apartment." He added, "Same type of peephole, though."

Mike might be the eleventh best-dressed man in America, Malone observed to himself, but he still carefully put the word "penthouse" in front of the word "apartment," underlining it ever so little. Ah, vanity . . .

Malone inspected the peephole. It was a standard type, of a sort installed on a great many doors, a tiny affair that could be slid open to permit a resident to peer out and see who was ringing the doorbell, without being seen by the ringer outside. A roll of papers, though, would slip through very easily. *Poke* through, he corrected himself—as, of course, would a bullet. And this peephole was a facsimile of the one installed in the door of Harry Brown's apartment.

Suddenly he knew he had to get back to town, and as soon as possible. Study of the peephole had caused him to remember what had been eluding him at the scene of Charlie Binkley's murder.

He strolled to the fireside as

though he didn't have a care in the world. He sat down. His hosts, he noticed with satisfaction, appeared to be pleased, even a little relaxed, at his easy acceptance of enforced confinement.

Olive broke the silence by suggesting a drink. Malone agreed that a drink would be both refreshing and timely. An idea had occurred to him. It might not work, and it was going to take almost incredible stamina to make it work but, at the moment, it was the only idea he had.

Mike Medinica flashed a white-toothed grin, chuckled and said, "And you don't need to worry, Malone, that Charlie Binkley will up in court and swear that he served the summons on Sam the Finder. He's already been taken care of."

Malone opened his mouth to speak and closed it again, a gesture that made him feel like a goldfish. The subject was not one he cared to pursue—at least, not just then.

Drinks were poured, and the conversation again lagged. At last, Olive rose, yawned and stretched sinuously, and announced that she was going to bed. One drink later, Sam the Finder solicitously asked Malone if he weren't getting tired. Malone smiled cheerfully and said that the hour was far too early for him, that he had never felt more wide awake in his life.

Conversation dipped to zero. Finally, Mike Medinica yawned and suggested a little game to pass the time. Malone allowed himself to brighten slightly. However, Sam the Finder, it seemed, didn't play cards. Parchesi, now . . .

Malone decided he could learn parchesi. He regretted that he hadn't brought much money with him, but . . .

Sam the Finder, waved objections away. He said, "Your credit's good here, Malone, and we'll play for very small stakes."

Malone said that that would be fine, and how about putting the bottle on the table, so they could all reach it.

IV

THE SKY WAS growing perceptibly lighter when the little lawyer leaned back in his chair and reflected ruefully that he'd had no idea there were so many intricacies to the parlor game of parchesi, or that it was possible to lose quite so much money at a child's game in the space of four hours.

However, he had accomplished his purpose. Mike Medinica sprawled on the davenport, one shoeless foot dragging on the floor, his mouth open and snores emerging from it at regular intervals. Sam the Finder had lasted half an hour longer, but now, at last, he was slumped forward on

the table, his head, on its final nod, having just missed the overflowing ashtray at the table's edge.

Putting both men in slumberland had required four hours and a little over three bottles—but neither of them was going to stir much for a while. Malone grinned happily. As for himself—well, he'd know better when he stood up, but at least his head was reasonably clear.

He scribbled an IOU for his \$439 losses of the night's play and propped it up on the table. The money didn't worry him much. After all, Sam the Finder was a client, and there was going to be an implausibly large fee involved, under the circumstances.

He rose and tiptoed—quite unnecessarily—to the closet. There, he retrieved his hat and overcoat, put them on and realized, for the first time since he entered Mike Medinica's big sedan, that he had had a gun in his pocket all along.

Oh well, he thought, things were better this way. It was hardly considered gentlemanly for an attorney to point a gun at a client. No, not even if the client kidnapped said attorney. Things were much better this way—much better. And it had all been a lot of good, more or less clean, fun, too.

He opened the door quietly and slipped out into the chill,

early morning air. His first breath sent his fumed head reeling, and he grasped the doorpost for support. It was just, he told himself firmly, that he wasn't used to so much fresh air so early in the morning. It had nothing to do with his having had to keep abreast of his hosts throughout the night.

Somehow, he managed to make his way down the driveway, through the soft, wet slush underfoot, weaving only slightly from side to side. At the gatepost, he paused and looked back. The big neo-Colonial house looked and sounded reassuringly peaceful.

It was going to be several hours before anyone woke up and came downstairs. Still, the occasion called for haste, not loitering. Malone wondered what time it was. His watch had stopped hours earlier, and the grey sky told him nothing.

"It gets early very dark out these days," he remarked aloud. He began slogging bravely along the highway.

It was cold and dreary and damp, and the going was heavy underfoot. Malone's head felt strangely weighted, but he was happy as the proverbial lark. Indeed, once he was safely out of earshot of Sam the Finder's house, he burst into occasional snatches of song. Even a stumble, which toppled him into the ditch,

failed to dismay the little lawyer.

There was a total of nine dollars and some loose change in his pocket, but he was cheerfully confidant this was enough to take him back to Chicago. Cabs, he knew, were seldom available here in the country, but he'd manage somehow.

A soft-focus sun was revealing itself through the murk, orange-yellow and discouraged-looking. But Malone saluted it joyously and burst again into song. He was on his way to the city, all was well, and would be even better once he reached the end of this infernal quagmire of a country road.

A perfidious patch of hidden ice toppled him into the ditch again. For a few minutes, he lay there, reasoning that this was as good a place as any to catch a quick forty winks. Finally, however, his better judgment returned a negative verdict, and he climbed out again. If he went to sleep now, Malone well knew, he'd probably sleep until sometime next summer. He recalled gruesome stories of people who had fallen asleep in blizzards and never waked up at all. True, this wasn't a blizzard—it was merely an ordinary little old Illinois drizzle. But sleeping in a ditch was undignified. Besides, he had promised von Flanagan.

As of the moment, just what he was going to tell von Flana-

gan wasn't entirely clear in his mind. Last night when he examined the peephole in Sam the Finder's door, in a sudden flash of what he still recognized as brilliant reasoning, he had known everything he needed to know, with enough left over for a sizable tip. Now, the thought had fled his wits as completely as though it had never existed at all. But it would come back, he told himself, it would come back.

The sound of a car in the distance brightened him with prospects of a lift at least part-way back to civilization. Then another thought smote him—there was a possibility that Olive Fliegle might have awakened early. She didn't look like the type of redhead who would awaken early, but you never could tell. If she did, if she came downstairs, she just might have set out after him, to bring him back. That would never do, Malone told himself. It would never, *never* do.

He looked around hopelessly for a place to hide. There was a slender fence running along the roadside, and one very small tree, the latter a considerable distance away. This left nothing but concealment offered by the ditch, and Malone was damned if he'd get back into that again. He decided to take his chances like a man. Besides, Olive looked reasonably frail. Frailly reasonable, too, which was even

more comforting to think about. He giggled at the word switch.

The car, however, turned out to be no Olive vehicle, but a small pick-up truck, its rear covered by a dingy tarpaulin. It slowed down. The driver surveyed Malone and finally stopped for him.

Suddenly, Malone realized that he was in no condition, in appearance or otherwise, to meet the public. Especially not after his last tumble into the ditch. Most particularly, this was no time to encounter small town cops, or civic-minded citizens. But it was too late to do anything about such mischances now.

The truck driver, a thin, weather-worn man, leaned forward. "Had an accident?" He opened the car door encouragingly.

"You might call it that," Malone said manfully. He didn't need much encouragement to climb aboard and slam the door before the driver could take a closer look at him and, if he were sensible, change his mind about offering a lift.

"Going far?" the man asked.

Malone opened his mouth to say, "Chicago," and then merely nodded. Finally, he said, "To the nearest cabstand." Then remembering where he was, he decided the remark must have been the wrong thing.

His benefactor drove in silence for a while. Then he said, "You

must have come from that Mr. Fliegle's place."

This time, Malone confined himself to nodding.

They turned into what appeared to be a main highway, and Malone felt a little better. He only hoped the truck was headed toward Chicago and not for some alien distance downstate. After a while, he reached into his pocket for cigars.

"Don't smoke," the truck driver said, shaking his head at the proffered perfecto.

Malone put his cigar away. They were quite damp and a little bent anyway.

Thereafter, the drive continued in silence that seemed, to Malone, to bear a mildly unfriendly over-tone. Occasionally the truck driver glanced at his passenger out of the corner of an eye.

The little lawyer wondered just what his driver thought of Sam the Finder and his friends, then decided he'd probably be happier in the long run if he didn't inquire.

V

SUDDENLY, a crossroads loomed ahead, complete with filling station and a roadside diner. The truck swerved into the filling station and braked to a stop beside a gas pump. The driver got out silently and went inside.

The little lawyer thought fast. He doubted that the pick-up

truck was in need of gas this early in the day. He doubted, too, that the driver had stopped merely to pass the time of day with the gas-station attendant. Then instinct took over, and he slipped quickly out of the truck and looked around for a place to hide.

Malone realized almost at once that there was no cover except for the truck itself. Filling station and diner stood on a bare patch of ground, and there was nothing else, not even a tree in sight. He trotted hastily around the truck, keeping it between himself and the two men in the filling station. Then he climbed into the rear and under the tarpaulin. He was, he discovered, nesting among a sack of potatoes.

A few moments later, he heard voices, and lay very still.

"He's beat it," the truck driver said.

There was mild speculation as to Malone's whereabouts, but not much excitement. For this, the little lawyer was grateful. Finally, the truck driver said, "Well, 'tain't none of my business anyway. The cops have his description now, and I've done my duty. Guess he was just another bum."

Malone valiantly resisted an impulse to leap out and beat the pair of them to a pulp. Only his promise to von Flanagan held him back. This was no time for delays of such frivolous nature,

even though his honor was involved.

He settled down as comfortably as he could among the potatoes, and worried. *Where was he?* He had not the foggiest notion. More important, where was he being driven? He peered out from under the tarpaulin, but saw nothing save dreary looking fields and dirty, melting snow. He wondered what time it was. He sighed and wished he dared to smoke a cigar—also that he had one, dry and unbent. He longed for a number of things, putting a hot bath, a shave and a clean white bed close to the top of the list.

Breakfast, too, would be a joyous fulfillment at the moment. He envisioned, without trying, fluffy scrambled eggs, fried eggs with yolks like golden moons, rosy-pink ham, a mound of lavishly buttered toast—but, he made up his mind firmly, no potatoes. Not this morning—perhaps he would never like them again. His waistline would appreciate such an allergy.

Malone never did know just how long the journey lasted. Afterward, he was to proclaim the journey a matter of hours, and long hours at that. There came a time when the truck slowed down, and there were the sounds of traffic around him. Malone peeked out again, saw

crowded cars and began to hope for the best.

Finally, the truck stopped altogether. Malone waited. He heard the door in front open and slam shut. He waited a discreet while longer, then lifted the tarpaulin a little. He was, he discovered, on some sort of business street. There were a few pedestrians strolling by, and he spotted a lunchroom, a drugstore, a shoe-repair shop and a dime store. No one noticed him.

I can see them, but they can't see me, he thought. The concept seemed important, perhaps the most important idea he had ever had in his life. The only trouble was that he wasn't entirely sure as to its application. However, it spurred him to immediate action. He slipped out from under the tarpaulin, jumped down from the truck and sped across the sidewalk to the security of the lunchroom. He perched, breathlessly, on the stool furthest from the front and ordered four cups of coffee and two cigars, fast.

The first cigar of the day, plus the coffee, improved not only his physical wellbeing but his wits. He pushed the thought of breakfast into the back of his mind, as something to be attended to later.

He walked back into the washroom and regarded himself thoughtfully in the mirror. True, his hair was hopelessly tangled, he was woefully unshaven, there

was a slight bruise on one cheek, his swollen eyes were red-rimmed and his clothes were spotted with mud. Yet it was quite plain to see that John J. Malone was still a fine, upstanding figure of a man. *Call him a bum, would they!* It was too bad he didn't have time to look up the truck driver and attend to settlement of his honor just then.

There were, however, more important matters to be attended to, and there was not time to waste on pure pleasure. He dug out a handful of coins, located a telephone and called von Flanagan.

The police officer's voice had a *thank heaven!* quality, at sound of Malone. The little lawyer said, "I'm keeping my promise, chum. You might get hold of Sam the Finder and Mike Medinica, out at Sam the Finder's country place, and have them waked up and brought into town. And meet me at . . ." he paused, added, "at Harry Brown's apartment. Never mind where I am." For that matter, he thought, *where am I?* Not, he hoped, in Milwaukee. Or somewhere in the Indiana flatlands.

It developed, when he examined the cover of the phone book, that he was merely in Evanston, and he breathed a sigh of relief. From the borderline between Evanston and Chicago to Harry Brown's apartment was a

reasonably fast taxi ride. He looked out cautiously for signs of the pick-up truck, saw that it had gone and went in search of a taxi.

The cab driver, when he found one, looked at him sourly and with suspicion. "That's a fairly long trip."

Malone indignantly waved his remaining nine dollars under the driver's nose and seriously considered taking a poke at it. No cab driver in Chicago proper would be so lamentably lacking in manners. But on this of all mornings, he had no time for lessons in etiquette, either. He brooded about it all the way into town, to the point of seriously considering giving the driver a ten cent tip. Instead, he handed him the entire bankroll and regretted it immediately.

There was no sign of von Flanagan outside Harry Brown's apartment and, for a moment, Malone considered waiting. There was just one question he wished he had remembered to ask the Homicide captain over the telephone. But that didn't matter now. He knew what the answer would be, because he knew what it had to be. The peephole in Sam the Finder's front door—the tarpaulin on the potato truck—*You can see them, but they can't see you*—It was as simple as that.

He took the elevator to Harry Brown's apartment and rang the

bell. It was several moments before he heard the peephole being opened, another before the door was opened.

"It's you," Harry Brown said joylessly. He looked tired and haggard. "Well, come in. Come in!" He slammed the door after Malone, added, "Nice of you to come all by yourself."

Malone suddenly began to wish he hadn't come sans escort.

"I suppose you figured it all out," said Harry Brown, regarding the little lawyer sourly.

"I found the gun . . ." Malone began—and knew immediately that he had made a mistake. He tried to move fast, but Harry moved faster, chopping down Malone's arm with one quick hand and plucking the gun from Malone's pocket with the other.

"Nice of you to bring this along with you," Brown said. A smile appeared on his thin mouth, but it didn't make him look any more pleasant to his guest.

Malone began thinking frantically and hopelessly of ways to stall for time. Von Flanagan was bound to arrive momentarily. He said, "I suppose Charlie Binkley told you he'd sold out . . ."

"I got no time for talk," Harry Brown said. "March, Malone."

Malone marched, still desperately trying to think of a way out. He felt numb.

"We're going to ride up in the elevator," Harry Brown said, al-

most gently. "I'm going to leave you there and walk down. I'm going to leave the lift door open, so the elevator is going to stay up there, with you in it. It will be the same gun that shot Charlie Binkley, only this time there won't be any Malone to find it. By the time anyone gets up, I'm going to be gone a long way away from here, and it's going to turn out that I haven't even been near here this morning."

He closed the elevator door. Malone wasn't even trying to think anymore. The numbness had crept into his mind. Harry Brown extended a thumb toward the *Up* button.

At that instant, the elevator started down with a sudden jerk. For a split second, Harry Brown was thrown off balance and, in that split second, Malone dived for him, his numbness forgotten. The gun went off, and Malone didn't care just then whether he had been hit or not—for Harry Brown had miraculously become the truck driver, the filling station attendant and the cab driver, all rolled into one. The little lawyer fought them all, savagely and joyously.

With a sudden bump, the elevator stopped. Malone's head struck the floor just as he heard the door flung open, and he almost blacked out.

"*He's killed Malone!*" von Flanagan yelled.

Malone sat up. "Not entirely," he said in an indignant whisper. Then he lapsed into dignified unconsciousness . . .

VI

"STOP FUSSING," Malone said crossly. "There's nothing the matter with me—nothing that a bath, breakfast and a drink won't fix right up." He glared savagely at the physician von Flanagan had hastily summoned.

"Shock and exposure," the doctor murmured. "A number of contusions and a nasty crack on the head."

Malone gave him a furious look, told him to go to hell and demanded to know if there was any rye in Harry Brown's kitchenette.

There was, and the alcohol made him feel rapidly better. He soon was able to sit up on Harry Brown's sofa and ignore the doctor. An anxious von Flanagan murmured something about a hospital. Then something about Malone's lying down again. Malone ignored him, too.

Sam the Finder and Mike Medinica sat across the room, and Malone was pleased to see that they looked considerably worse than he felt. Von Flanagan had done a neat, swift job of getting them to Harry Brown's apartment. It was not that their presence was absolutely necessary to Malone any longer, but

they were still on his client list. Besides, the little lawyer liked an audience at such times.

Von Flanagan finally sent the doctor away. He gave Sam the Finder and Mike Medinica an uncomfortable look. "Harry Brown won't . . ." he began. Then, "I mean, nothing must come out, but—"

"Stop worrying," Malone said, cutting him off. "My pals here won't say a word about your being here when Charlie Binkley was shot. In return for which, I'll never tell you, or anyone else, how Sam the Finder got his black eye." He observed the wan, unhappy grin on Sam the Finder's face.

Malone looked at von Flanagan. "I had everything figured wrong. First, I figured you'd seen the shooting. Then I realized you'd only heard it. You picked up the description of a tallish man in a tan overcoat from Harry Brown." There was a faint pink on von Flanagan's face and Malone added hastily, "Just like witnesses always do."

He lit his second cigar of the day and puffed on it happily, then resumed with, "I didn't know what I was hunting for when I searched the building—I just had a feeling something was wrong. Then I found the gun. I still figured Sam the Finder had killed Charlie Binkley—in spite of the tall man in the tan overcoat, which cer-

tainly wasn't Sam, and in spite of the fact Sam wouldn't have ditched the gun."

Sam said, in a tone of injured innocence, "I never carry a gun anyway, Malone. You know that."

"You're among friends," Malone said. "Besides, Sam, the point is you didn't carry *this* gun." He paused to puff again happily on the cigar. "I finally spotted the flaw in the whole setup. If someone had shot through the peephole, he wouldn't have known who he was shooting, because he couldn't see in."

He paused again, this time for dramatic effect, added, "Get it?" Then, "That meant someone could have been after Harry Brown as well as Charlie. And any number of people might have wanted to shoot Harry, including Sam the Finder and Mike Medinica."

He waved down their protests, went on with, "But the point is, if the shot was fired *through* the peephole, whoever fired it wouldn't have known who he was shooting. And it didn't seem likely that anyone would shoot indiscriminately through a peephole in the hopes of hitting Charlie Binkley, or Harry Brown, or whoever happened to look out the door."

Von Flanagan said, "But when I came out in the living room . . ." his voice trailed off as comprehension dawned in a rosy flush of embarrassment.

"You saw Charlie Binkley on

the floor," said Malone, "lying in front of the doorway. The door was open, and Harry was half-way down the hall—*past* the trash chute, by that time—supposedly chasing a murderer. Which was just what Harry Brown wanted you to see."

Von Flanagan growled, "It could have happened to anybody."

"Happens all the time," Malone told him cheerfully. He drew a long breath. "Charlie Binkley had been bird-dogging for Harry Brown for a long time, in addition to his being a process server. But this time, he decided to sell out to the other side." At this point, Malone remembered the question he had wanted to ask von Flanagan earlier. He said, "Did Charlie Binkley have any money on him when your boys went through his pockets last night?"

"More than two grand," von Flanagan replied promptly.

Malone nodded. "That was what Mike Medinica meant when he told me Charlie Binkley had been taken care of and wasn't going to testify that he'd served the papers. I should have known it all the time."

Mike Medinica cleared his throat and said, "Of course, *this* is just between friends."

"Of course," von Flanagan

echoed. He added, "The hearing doesn't come under my department anyway."

"So Harry Brown," Malone resumed, "having several reasons for wanting to get rid of his ex-bird dog, saw a heaven-sent opportunity. Charlie Binkley had told him how Sam the Finder got his shiner. That was another point. His murderer had to be somebody who knew about Sam the Finder's black eye, and that narrowed the field. Von Flanagan was in the next room, and setting things up was easy for Harry Brown." Malone sighed happily, picked up his glass and said, "Just like finding out what happened was easy for me."

There was a brief silence. Malone thought of the breakfast he was going to have, and the sleep. And there was the pleasant little matter of money . . .

Sam the Finder spoke up as though he'd been reading Malone's thoughts. He said, "You'll have a handsome fee for this, Malone. You not only accomplished what I had in mind, but you disposed of the hearing once and for all." He smiled. "Though I must admit—you certainly did it the hard way."

Malone yawned, stretched and smiled back. "Oh well," he said. "Things were getting so dull . . ."

ROBERT BLOCH

Connors thought Krauss' widow would be really stacked. He was hardly anticipating a used-up drab. Yet his interest in the woman went far, far deeper than the physical, and one day it was to lead him to the boat-house upon the—

Water's Edge

THE fly-specked lettering on the window read *The Bright Spot Restaurant*. The sign overhead urged *Eat*.

He wasn't hungry, and the place didn't look especially attractive, but he went inside anyway.

It was a counter joint with a single row of hard-backed booths lining one wall. A half-dozen customers squatted on stools at the end of the counter, near the door. He walked past them and slid onto a stool at the far end.

There he sat, staring at the three waitresses. None of them looked right to him, but he had to take a chance. He waited until one of the women approached him.

"Yours, Mister?"

"Coke."

She brought it to him and set the glass down. He pretended to be studying the menu and talked without looking up at her.

"Say, does a Mrs. Helen Krauss work here?"

"I'm Helen Krauss."

He lifted his eyes. What kind of a switch was this, anyway? He remembered the way Mike used to talk about her, night after night. "She's a tall blonde, but stacked. Looks a lot like that dame who plays the dumb blonde on television—what's-her-name—you know the one I mean. But she's no dope, not Helen. And boy, when it comes to loving....

After that, his descriptions would become anatomically intricate, but all intricacies had been carefully filed in memory.

He examined those files now, but nothing in them corresponded to what he saw before him.

This woman was tall, but there all resemblance ended. She must have tipped the scales at one-sixty, at least, and her hair was a dull, mousy brown. She wore glasses, too. Behind the thick lenses, her faded blue eyes peered stolidly at him.

She must have realized he was staring, and he knew he had to talk fast. "I'm looking for a Helen Krauss who used to live over in

Norton Center. She was married to a man named Mike."

The stolid eyes blinked. "That's me. So what's this all about?"

"I got a message for you from your husband."

"Mike? He's dead."

"I know. I was with him when he died. Just before, anyway. I'm Rusty Connors. We were cell-mates for two years."

Her expression didn't change, but her voice dropped to a whisper. "What's the message?"

He glanced around. "I can't talk here. What time do you get off?"

"Seven-thirty."

"Good. Meet you outside?"

She hesitated. "Make it down at the corner, across the street. There's a park, you know?"

He nodded, rose and left without looking back.

This wasn't what he had expected—not after the things Mike had told him about his wife. When he bought his ticket for Hainesville, he had had other ideas in mind. It would have been nice to find this hot, goodlooking blonde widow of Mike's and, maybe, combine business with pleasure. He had even thought about the two of them blowing town together, if she was half as nice as Mike said. But that was out, now. He wanted no part of this big, fat, stupid-looking slob with the dull eyes.

Rusty wondered how Mike could have filled him with such a

line of bull for two years straight—and then he knew. Two years straight—that was the answer—two years in a bare cell, without a woman. Maybe it had got so that, after a time, Mike believed his own story, that Helen Krauss became beautiful to him. Maybe Mike had gone a little stir-simple before he died, and made up a lot of stuff.

Rusty only hoped Mike had been telling the truth about one thing. He had better have been, because what Mike had told Connors, there in the cell, was what brought him to town. It was this that was making him cut into this rat-race, that had led him to Mike's wife.

He hoped Mike had been telling the truth about hiding away the fifty-six thousand dollars.

She met him in the park, and it was dark. That was good, because nobody would notice them together. Besides, he couldn't see her face, and she couldn't see his, and that would make it easier to say what he had to say.

They sat down on a bench behind the bandstand, and he lit a cigarette. Then he remembered that it was important to be pleasant, so he offered the pack to her.

She shook her head. "No thanks—I don't smoke."

"That's right. Mike told me." He paused. "He told me a lot of things about you, Helen."

"He wrote me about you, too."

He said you were the best friend he ever had."

"I'd like to think so. Mike was a great guy in my book. None better. He didn't belong in a crummy hole like that."

"He said the same about you."

"Both of us got a bad break, I guess. Me, I was just a kid who didn't know the score. When I got out of Service, I lay around for a while until my dough was gone, and then I took this job in a bookie joint. I never pulled any strong-arm stuff in my life until the night the place was raided.

"The boss handed me this suitcase, full of dough, and told me to get out the back way. And there was this copper, coming at me with a gun. So I hit him over the head with the suitcase. It was just one of those things—I didn't mean to hurt him, even, just wanted to get out. So the copper ends up with a skull-fracture and dies."

"Mike wrote me about that. You had a tough deal."

"So did he, Helen." Rusty used her first name deliberately and let his voice go soft. It was part of the pitch. "Like I said, I just couldn't figure him out. An honest John like him, up and knocking off his best friend in a payroll stickup. And all alone, too. Then getting rid of the body, so they'd never find it. They never did find Pete Taylor, did they?"

"Please! I don't want to talk about it any more."

"I know how you feel." Rusty took her hand. It was plump and sweaty, and it rested in his like a big warm piece of meat. But she didn't withdraw it, and he went on talking. "It was just circumstantial evidence that pinned it on him, wasn't it?"

"Somebody saw Mike pick Pete up that afternoon," Helen said. "He'd lost his car-keys somewhere, and I guess he thought it would be all right if Mike took him over to the factory with the payroll money. That was all the police needed. They got to him before he could get rid of the bloodstains. Of course, he didn't have an alibi. I swore he was home with me all afternoon. They wouldn't buy that. So he went up for ten years."

"And did two, and died," Rusty said. "But he never told how he got rid of the body. He never told where he put the dough."

He could see her nodding in the dimness. "That's right. I guess they beat him up something awful, but he wouldn't tell them a thing."

Rusty was silent for a moment. Then he took a drag on his cigarette and said, "Did he ever tell you?"

Helen Krauss made a noise in her throat. "What do you think? I got out of Norton Center because I couldn't stand the way people kept talking about it. I came all the way over here to

Hainesville. For two years, I've been working in that lousy hash-house. Does that sound like he told me anything?"

Rusty dropped the cigarette stub on the sidewalk, and its little red eye winked up at him. He stared at the eye as he spoke.

"What would you do if you found that money, Helen? Would you turn it over to the cops?"

She made the noise in her throat again. "What for? To say, 'Thank you,' for putting Mike away and killing him? That's what they did, they killed him. Pneumonia, they told me—I know about their pneumonia! They let him rot in that cell, didn't they?"

"The croaker said it was just flu. I put up such a stink over it, they finally took him down to the Infirmary."

"Well, *I* say they killed him. And *I* say he paid for that money with his life. I'm his widow—it's mine."

"Ours," said Rusty.

Her fingers tightened, and her nails dug into his palms. "He told you where he hid it? Is that it?"

"Just a little. Before they took him away. He was dying, and couldn't talk much. But I heard enough to give me a pretty good hunch. I figured, if I came here when I got out and talked to you, we could put things together and find the dough. Fifty-six gees, he said—even if we split it, that's still a lot of money."

"Why are you cutting me in on it, if you know where it is?" There was an edge of sudden suspicion in her voice, and he sensed it, met it head-on.

"Because, like I told you, he didn't say enough. We'd have to figure out what it means, and then do some hunting. I'm a stranger around here, and people might get suspicious if they saw me snooping. But if you helped, maybe there wouldn't be any need to snoop. Maybe we could go right to it."

"Business deal, is that it?"

Rusty stared at the glowing cigarette butt again. Its red eye winked back at him.

"Not *all* business, Helen. You know how it was with Mike and me. He talked about you all the time. After a while, I got the funniest feeling, like I already knew you—knew you as well as Mike. I wanted to know you better."

He kept his voice down, and he felt her nails against his palm. Suddenly his hand returned the pressure, and his voice broke. "Helen, I don't know, maybe I'm screwy, but I was over two years in that hole. Two years without a woman, you got any idea what that means to a guy?"

"It's been over two years for me, too."

He put his arms around her, forced his lips to hers. It didn't take much forcing. "You got a room?" he whispered.

"Yes, Rusty—I've got a room."

They rose, clinging together. Before moving away, he took a last look at the little winking red eye and crushed it out under his foot.

II

ANOTHER WINKING red eye burned in the bedroom, and he held the cigarette to one side in his hand so as to keep the light away. He didn't want her to see the disgust in his face.

Maybe she was sleeping now. He hoped so, because it gave him time to think.

So far, everything was working out. Everything *had* to work out, this time. Because before, there had always been foulups, somewhere along the line.

Grabbing the satchel full of dough, when the cops raided the bookie joint, had seemed like a good idea at the time. He had thought he could lam out the back door before anyone noticed in the confusion. But he had fouled that one up himself, and landed in stir.

Getting buddy-buddy with that little jerk Mike had been another good idea. It hadn't been long before he knew everything about the payroll caper—everything except where Mike had stashed the loot. Mike never *would* talk about that. It wasn't until he took sick that Rusty could handle him without anybody getting wise. He had made sure Mike was real sick before he put real pressure on.

Even then, the lousy fink hadn't come across—Rusty must have half-killed him, right there in the cell. Maybe he'd overdone it, because all he got out of him was the one sentence before the guards showed up.

For a while there, he had wondered if the little quiz show was going to kick back on him. If Mike had pulled out of it, he'd have talked. But Mike hadn't pulled out of it—he had died in the Infirmary before morning, and they had said it was the pneumonia that did it.

So Rusty was safe—and Rusty could make plans.

Up 'till now, his plans were going through okay. He had never applied for parole—believing it better to sweat out another six months, so he could go free without anybody hanging onto his tail. When they sprung him, he had taken the first bus to Hainesville. He knew where to go because Mike had told him about Helen working in this restaurant.

He hadn't been conning her as to his need for her in the deal. He needed her all right. He needed help, needed her to front for him, so he wouldn't have to look around on his own and arouse curiosity when he asked questions of strangers. That part was straight enough.

But, all along, he had believed what Mike told him about Helen—that she was a good-looking

doll, the kind of dame you read about in the paperback books. He had coked himself up on the idea of finding the dough *and* doing away with her, of having a real ball.

Well, that part was out.

He made a face in the darkness as he remembered the clammy fat of her, the wheezing and the panting and the clutching. No, he couldn't take much more of that. But he had had to go through with it, it was part of the plan. He needed her on his side, and that was the best way to keep her in line.

But now, he'd have to decide on the next move. If they found the dough, how could he be sure of her, once they made the split? He didn't want to be tied to this kitchen mechanic, and there had to be a way . . .

"Darling, are you awake?"

Her voice! And calling him "darling." He shuddered, then controlled himself.

"Yeah." He doused the cigarette in an ashtray.

"Do you feel like talking now?"

"Sure."

"I thought maybe we'd better make plans."

"That's what I like, a practical dame." He forced a smile into his voice. "You're right, baby. The sooner we get to work the better." He sat up and turned to her. "Let's start at the beginning—with what Mike told me, before he

died. He said they'd never find the money, they couldn't—because Pete still had it."

For a moment Helen Krauss was silent. Then she said, "Is that all?"

"All? What more do you want? It's plain as the nose on your face, isn't it? The dough is hidden with Pete Taylor's body."

He could feel Helen's breath on his shoulder. "Never mind the nose on my face," she said. "I know where that is. But for two years, all the cops in the county haven't been able to find Pete Taylor's body." She sighed. "I thought you really had something, but I guess I was wrong. I should of known."

Rusty grabbed her by the shoulders. "Don't talk like that! We've got the answer we need. All we got to do now is figure where to look."

"Sure. Real easy!" Her tone dripped sarcasm.

"Think back, now. Where did the cops look?"

"Well, they searched our place, of course. We were living in a rented house, but that didn't stop them. They tore up the whole joint, including the cellar. No dice there."

"Where else?"

"The sheriff's department had men out for a month, searching the woods around Norton's Center. They covered all the old barns and deserted farmhouses too,

places like that. They even dragged the lake. Pete Taylor was a bachelor—he had a little shack in town and one out at the lake, too. They ripped them both apart. Nothing doing."

Rusty was silent. "How much time did Mike have between picking up Pete and coming back home again?"

"About three hours."

"Hell, then he couldn't have gone very far, could he? The body must be hid near town."

"That's just how the police figured. I tell you, they did a job. They dug up the ditches, drained the quarry. It was no use."

"Well, there's got to be an answer somewhere. Let's try another angle. Pete Taylor and your husband were pals, right?"

"Yes. Ever since we got married, Mike was thick with him. They got along great together."

"What did they do? I mean, did they drink, play cards or what?"

"Mike wasn't much on the sauce. Mostly, they just hunted and fished. Like I say, Pete Taylor had this shack out at the lake."

"Is that near Norton's Center?"

"About three miles out." Helen sounded impatient. "I know what you're thinking, but it's no good. I tell you, they dug things up all around there. They even ripped out the floorboards and stuff like that."

"What about sheds, boat-houses?"

"Pete Taylor didn't have anything else on his property. When Mike and him went fishing, they borrowed a boat from the neighbors down the line." She sighed again. "Don't think I haven't tried to figure it out. For two years, I've figured, and there just isn't any answer."

Rusty found another cigarette and lit it. "For fifty-six grand, there's got to be an answer," he said. "What happened the day Pete Taylor was killed? Maybe there's something you forgot about."

"I don't know what happened, really. I was at home, and Mike had the day off, so he went downtown to bum around."

"Did he say anything before he left? Was he nervous? Did he act funny?"

"No—I don't think he had anything planned, if that's what you mean. I think it was just one of those things—he found himself in the car with Pete Taylor and all this money, and he just decided to do it."

"Well, they figured it was all planned in advance. They said he knew it was payroll day, and how Pete always went to the bank in his car and got the money in cash. Old Man Huggins at the factory was a queer duck, and he liked to pay that way. Anyway, they say Pete went into the bank, and Mike must have been waiting in the parking lot behind."

"They think he sneaked over and stole Pete's car keys, so, when he came out with the guard, Pete couldn't get started. Mike waited until the guard left, then walked over and noticed Pete, as if it was an accident he happened to be there, and asked what the trouble was.

"Something like that must have happened, because the guy in the parking-lot said they talked, and then Pete got into Mike's car and they drove off together. That's all they know, until Mike came home alone almost three hours later."

Rusty nodded. "He came home to you, in the car, alone. What did he say?"

"Nothing much. There wasn't time, I guess. Because the squad car pulled up about two minutes after he got in the house."

"So fast? Who tipped them off?"

"Well, naturally the factory got worried when Pete never showed with the payroll. So Old Man Huggins called the bank, and the bank checked with the cashier and the guard, and somebody went out and asked around in the parking lot. The attendant told about how Pete had left in Mike's car. So they came around here, looking for him."

"Did he put up any struggle?"

"No. He never even said a word. They just took him away. He was in the bathroom, washing up."

"Much dirt on him?" Rusty asked.

"Just his hands, is all. They never found anything they could check up on in their laboratories, or whatever. His shoes were muddy, I think. There was a big fuss because his gun was missing. That was the worst part, his taking the gun with him. They never found it, of course, but they knew he'd owned one, and it was gone. He said he'd lost it months beforehand but they didn't believe him."

"Did you?"

"I don't know."

"Anything else?"

"Well, he had a cut on his hand. It was bleeding a little when he came in. I noticed it and asked him about it. He was halfway upstairs, and he said something about rats. Later, in court, he told them he'd caught his hand in the window-glass, and that's why there was blood in the car. One of the windows was cracked, too. But they analyzed the blood, and it wasn't his type. It checked with Pete Taylor's blood-type record."

Rusty took a deep drag. "But he didn't tell you that, when he came home. He said a rat bit him."

"No—he just said something about rats, I couldn't make out what. In court, the doctor testified he'd gone upstairs and cut his hand open with a razor. They found his razor on the wash-stand, and it was bloody."

"Wait a minute," Rusty said, slowly. "He started to tell you something about rats. Then he went upstairs and opened up his hand with a razor. Now it's beginning to make sense, don't you see? A rat *did* bite him, maybe when he was getting rid of the body. But if any one knew that, they'd look for the body some place where there were rats. So he covered up by opening the wound with his razor."

"Maybe so," Helen Krauss said. "But where does that leave us? Are we going to have to search every place with rats in it around Norton's Center?"

"I hope not," Rusty answered. "I hate the damned things. They give me the creeps. Used to see them in Service, big fat things hanging around the docks . . ." He snapped his fingers. "Just a second. You say, when Pete and Mike went fishing, they borrowed a boat from the neighbors. Where did the neighbors keep their boat?"

"They had a boathouse."

"Did the cops search there?"

"I don't know—I guess so."

"Maybe they didn't search good enough. Were the neighbors on the property that day?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure enough. They were a city couple from Chicago, name of Thomason. Two weeks before the payroll robbery, they got

themselves killed in an auto accident on the way home."

"So nobody was around at all, and Mike knew it."

"That's right." Helen's voice was suddenly hoarse. "It was too late in the season anyway, just like now. The lake was deserted. Do you think . . . ?"

"Who's living in the neighbors' place now?" Rusty asked.

"No one, the last I heard. They didn't have any kids, and the real estate man couldn't sell it. Pete Taylor's place is vacant, too. Same reason."

"It adds up—adds up to fifty-six thousand dollars, if I'm right. When could we go?"

"Tomorrow, if you like. It's my day off. We can use my car. Oh, darling, I'm so excited!"

She didn't have to tell him. He could feel it, feel her as she came into his arms. Once more, he had to force himself, had to keep thinking about something else, so that he wouldn't betray how he felt.

He had to keep thinking about the money, and about what he'd do after they found it. He needed the right answer, fast.

He was still thinking when she lay back, and then she suddenly surprised him by asking, "What are you thinking about, darling?"

He opened his mouth and the truth popped out. "The money," he said. "All that money. Twenty-eight gees apiece."

"Does it have to be apiece, darling?"

He hesitated—and then the right answer came. "Of course not—not unless you want it that way." And it wouldn't be. It was still fifty-six thousand, and it would be his after they found it.

All he had to do was rub her out.

III

IF RUSTY had any doubts about going through with it, they vanished the next day. He spent the morning and afternoon with her in her room, because he had to. There was no sense in letting them be seen together here in town or anywhere around the lake area.

So he forced himself to stall her, and there was only one way to do that. By the time twilight came, he would have killed her anyway, money or no money, just to be rid of her stinking fat body.

How could Mike have ever figured she was good-looking? He'd never know, any more than he'd ever known what had gone on in the little jerk's head when he suddenly decided to knock off his best friend and steal the dough.

But that wasn't important now—the important thing was to find that black metal box.

Around four o'clock he slipped downstairs and walked around the block. In ten minutes, she picked him up at the corner in her car.

It was a good hour's drive to the lake. She took a detour around Norton's Center, and they approached the lake shore by a gravel road. He wanted her to cut the lights, but she said there was no need, because nobody was there anyway. As they scanned the shore Rusty could see she was telling the truth—the lake was dark, deserted, in the early November night.

They parked behind Pete Taylor's shack. At sight of it, Rusty realized that the body couldn't possibly be hidden there. The little rickety structure wouldn't have concealed a dead fly for long.

Helen got a flashlight from the car.

"I suppose you want to go straight to the boathouse," she said. "It's down this way, to the left. Be careful—the path is slippery."

It was treacherous going in the darkness. Rusty followed her, wondering if now was the time. He could pick up a rock and bash her head in while she had her back to him.

No, he decided, better wait. First see if the dough was there, see if he could find a good place to leave her body. There must be a good place—Mike had found one.

The boathouse stood behind a little pier running out into the lake. Rusty tugged at the door. It was padlocked.

"Stand back," he said. He picked up a stone from the bank. The lock was flimsy, rusty with disuse. It broke easily and fell to the ground.

He took the flashlight from her, opened the door and peered in. The beam swept the interior, piercing the darkness. But it wasn't total darkness. Rusty saw the glow of a hundred little red cigarette butts winking up at him, like eyes.

Then, he realized, they were eyes.

"Rats," he said. "Come on, don't be afraid. Looks like our hunch was right."

Helen moved behind him, and she wasn't afraid. But he had really been talking to himself. He didn't like rats. He was glad when the rodents scattered and disappeared before the flashlight's beam. The sound of footsteps sent them scampering off into the corners, into their burrows beneath the boathouse floor.

The floor! Rusty sent the beam downward. It was concrete, of course. And underneath . . . ?

"Damn it!" he said. "They must have been here."

They had—because the once-solid concrete floor was rubble. The pick-axes of the sheriff's men had done a thorough job.

"I told you," Helen Krauss sighed. "They looked everywhere."

Rusty swept the room with

light. There was no boat, nothing stored in corners. The beam bounced off bare walls.

He raised it to the flat roof of the ceiling and caught only the reflection of mica from tar-paper insulation.

"It's no use," Helen told him. "It couldn't be this easy."

"There's still the house," Rusty said. "Come on."

He turned and walked out of the place, glad to get away from the rank, fetid animal odor. He turned the flashlight toward the roof.

Then he stopped. "Notice anything?" he said.

"What?"

"The roof. It's higher than the ceiling."

"So what?"

"There could be space up there," Rusty said.

"Yes, but . . ."

"Listen."

She was silent—both of them were silent. In the silence, they could hear the emerging sound. It sounded at first like the patter of rain on the roof, but it wasn't raining, and it wasn't coming from the roof. It was coming from directly underneath—the sound of tiny, scurrying feet between roof and ceiling. The rats were there. The rats and what else?

"Come on," he muttered.

"Where are you going?"

"Up to the house—to find a ladder."

He didn't have to break in, and that was fine. There was a ladder in the shed, and he carried it back. Helen discovered a crowbar. She held the flashlight while he propped the ladder against the wall and climbed up. The crowbar pried off the tarpaper in strips. It came away easily, ripping out from the few nails. Apparently, the stuff had been applied in a hurry. A man with only a few hours to work in has to do a fast job.

Underneath the tarpaper, Rusty found timbers. Now the crowbar really came in handy. The boards groaned in anguish, and there were other squeaking sounds as the rats fled down into the cracks along the side-walls. Rusty was glad they fled, otherwise he'd never have had the guts to crawl up there through the opening in the boards and look around. Helen handed him the flashlight, and he used it.

He didn't have to look very far.

The black metal box was sitting there right in front of him. Beyond it lay the thing.

Rusty knew it was Pete Taylor, because it had to be, but there was no way of identification. There wasn't a shred of clothing left, nor a shred of flesh, either. The rats had picked him clean, picked him down to the bones. All that was left was a skeleton—a skeleton and a black metal box.

Rusty clawed the box closer,

opened it. He saw the bills, bulging in stacks. He smelled the money, smelled it even above the sickening fetor. It smelled good, it smelled of perfume and tenderloin steak and the leathery seat-cover aroma of a shiny new car.

"Find anything?" Helen called. Her voice was trembling.

"Yes," he answered, and his voice was trembling just a little too. "I've got it. Hold the ladder, I'm coming down now."

He was coming down now, and that meant it was time—time to act. He handed her the crowbar and the flashlight, but kept his fingers on the side of the black metal box. He wanted to carry that himself. Then, when he put it down on the floor, and she bent over to look at it, he could pick up a piece of concrete rubble and let her have it.

It was going to be easy. He had everything figured out in advance—everything except the part about handing her the crowbar.

That's what she used to hit him with when he got to the bottom of the ladder . . .

He must have been out for ten minutes, at least. Anyway, it was long enough for her to find the rope somewhere. Maybe she had kept it in the car. Wherever she got it, she knew how to use it. His wrists and ankles hurt almost as much as the back of his head, where the blood was starting to congeal.

He opened his mouth and discovered that it did no good. She had gagged him tightly with a handkerchief. All he could do was lie there in the rubble on the boathouse floor and watch her pick up the black metal box.

She opened it and laughed.

The flashlight was lying on the floor. In its beam, he could see her face quite plainly. She had taken off her glasses, and he discovered the lenses lying shattered on the floor.

Helen Krauss saw what he was staring at and laughed again.

"I don't need those things any more," she told him. "I never did. It was all part of the act, like letting my hair go black and putting on all this weight. For two years now, I've put on this dumb slob routine, just so nobody'd notice me. When I leave town, nobody's going to pay any attention either. Sometimes it's smart to play dumb, you know?"

Rusty made noises underneath the gag. She thought that was funny, too.

"I suppose you're finally beginning to figure it out," she said. "Mike never meant to pull off any payroll job. Pete Taylor and I had been cheating on him for six months, and he had just begun to suspect. I don't know who told him, or what they said."

"He never said anything to me about it beforehand—just went downtown with his gun to find

Pete and kill him. Maybe he meant to kill me too. He never even thought about the money at the time. All he knew was that it would be easy to pick Pete up on payroll day.

"I guess he knocked Pete out and drove him down here, and Pete came to before he died and kept saying he was innocent. At least, Mike told me that much when he came back.

"I never got a chance to ask where he'd taken Pete or what he'd done with the money. The first thing I did, when Mike came home and said what he'd done, was to cover up for myself. I swore it was all a pack of lies, that Pete and I hadn't done anything wrong. I told him we'd take the money and go away together. I was still selling him on that when the cops came.

"I guess he believed me—because he never cracked during the trial. But I didn't get a chance again to ask where he hid the dough. He couldn't write me from prison, because they censor all the mail. So my only out was to wait—wait until he came back, or someone else came. And that's how it worked out."

Rusty tried to say something, but the gag was too tight.

"Why did I conk you one? For the same reason you were going to conk me. Don't try to deny it—that's what you intended to do, wasn't it? I know the way creeps

like you think." Her voice was soft.

She smiled down at him. "I know how you get to thinking when you're a prisoner—because I've been a prisoner myself, for two years—a prisoner in this big body of mine. I've sweated it out for that money, and now I'm leaving. I'm leaving here, leaving the dumb waitress prison I made for myself. I'm going to shed forty pounds and bleach my hair again and go back to being the old Helen Krauss—with fifty-six grand to live it up with."

Rusty tried just once more. All that came out was a gurgle. "Don't worry," she said, "they won't find me. And they won't find you for a long, long time. I'm putting that lock back on the door when I go. Besides, there's nothing to tie the two of us together. It's clean as a whistle."

She turned, and then Rusty stopped gurgling. He hunched forward and kicked out with his bound feet. They caught her right across the back of the knees, and she went down. Rusty rolled across the rubble and raised his feet from the ground, like a flail. They came down on her stomach, and she let out a gasp.

She fell against the boathouse door, and it slammed shut, her own body tight against it. Rusty began to kick at her face. In a moment the flashlight rolled off

into the rubble and went out, so he kicked in the direction of the gasps. After a while, the moaning stopped, and it was silent in the boathouse.

He listened for her breathing and heard no sound. He rolled over to her and pressed his face against something warm and wet. He shivered and drew back, then pressed again. The unbroken area of her flesh was cold.

He rolled over to the side and tried to free his hands. He worked the rope-ends against the jagged edges of rubble, hoping to feel the strands fray and part. His wrists bled, but the rope held. Her body was wedged against the door, holding it shut—holding him here in the rank darkness.

Rusty knew he had to move her, had to get the door open fast. He had to get out of here. He began to butt his head against her, trying to move her—but she was too solid, too heavy, to budge. He banged into the money-box and tried to gurgle at her from under the gag, tried to tell her that she must get up and let them out, that they were both in prison together now, and the money didn't matter. It was all a mistake, he hadn't meant to hurt her or anyone, he just wanted to get out.

But he didn't get out.

After a little while, the rats came back.

A Short Short Story by

CHARLES IRVING

There are husbands who take joy in wearing an apron and helping out in the kitchen. Other men may drop the dishcloth and reach for a knife.

You Wash, and I'll Dry

IT WAS raining hard, and the wind was blowing in angry gusts.

As John got off the bus in Queens, near the subway entrance, he swore irritably. It was just like that pompous fool Jimpson to insist on giving him a lift, and then to drop him far from the boulevard—so that he had to get a bus. John hated buses, and preferred to do the whole journey from Manhattan by subway.

An alleyway offered a short cut to his house from the bus stop—although not from the subway station. He used it seldom, and thought of it mentally as the *back way*.

As he stumbled along the broken alley pavement, John came to the conclusion that he hated everything—not only buses, but every created thing. It was dark, it was wet, and, once or twice, his feet slipped. The old wound in his head throbbed.

He reached the front door of the little house on which he

vaguely hoped, some day, to pay off the mortgage, took out his latchkey and went in. His wife was moving about in the kitchen.

He hung up his dripping coat and hat and went into the dining room. His wife brought the dinner in, glanced at him sharply and, sensing his mood, said nothing. For a time, they ate, in an aura of glum silence. At length, however, he expressed grudging appreciation.

"Haven't had a better feed for some time," he admitted.

A curious expression came over his wife's face. "Not even yesterday," she asked gently, "when you had lunch at the Silverstone Grill with that girl from your office?"

He sat up sharply. "Who told you that?"

"It doesn't matter *who* told me, John," she replied, rather wearily. "The only thing is, we haven't much money, and the cost of living is still going up. Is it really fair to spend your money on that girl?"

"Money, money, money! That's all you think about. Who earns the money, I'd like to know? Who works for it, eh, my sweet?"

"Very well, John," she said with the sad submissiveness he detested. "I suppose you'll do as you like. You always have. Let's get these things cleared away." She rose, and began collecting the plates.

He sat there, unheeding, muttering to himself. The throbbing in his head grew worse.

Finally, he got up and went into the kitchen. She had filled the sink with hot water, had begun to wash up. Mechanically, through force of habit, he took up the dishcloth. "You wash," he said in a toneless voice. "I'll dry."

She said nothing—simply went on washing, stacking the plates and dishes on the draining board. Idly, he picked up the carving knife they so seldom used.

"John," she said, without looking round, "it is really getting rather difficult—about the money, I mean. Do you think you could let me have a little more, for the household budget? I don't mind your taking the girl out so much—but I *do* mind letting things get shabby when they ought to be—well, kept nice, or replaced when they wear out."

A flame of anger surged up within him. Her back was towards him, as he rinsed the vegetable

dish. Mentally choosing a spot, on the left side, he drove the knife into her back with all the force he could muster, stepping aside as he did so, in case the blood spurted. She collapsed over the sink.

He stepped back with a gasp of horror at what he had done. He stood there, trembling violently, for a long time. Presently, he got hold of himself. His hands were still shaking, but he was able to think coherently. He must get away. Yes, but first he must make it look like—like what? Suicide was impossible. It would have to be an attack—an attack by some tramp or marauder . . .

He went to the back door, unbolted it, took off his shoes, stepped out in his stocking feet. He found a muddy patch in the tiny yard and trod in it. Then he came back in and crossed the kitchen to the sink, leaving a satisfactory trail of vague, amorphous, muddy prints.

To touch his wife's body brought on a kind of sick horror—but the thing had to look as if she had been attacked. He seized it, pulled it away from the sink, gripped the front of her dress, tore it violently. Then he let the body fall, bent down and tore one of her stockings.

Finally—and for this, he had to turn his head away—he picked up a brush with long stiff bristles and a heavy wooden handle. Holding it by the bristles to avoid

leaving fingerprints, he struck her with it across the face.

He looked at the sink. He must leave that as it was—it appeared natural enough—the washed dishes stacked on the left, the unwashed cutlery waiting on the right, the water still soapy.

What about the carving knife? Nervously himself, John dropped it into the still warm water in the sink. Then he looked at his feet. They were almost dry and no longer left prints on the linoleum.

He went out into the hall, put on his hat, coat and gloves, searched about until he found his wife's handbag. This he took into the kitchen. There he emptied the contents on the floor and put in his pocket the little money it contained.

From a drawer in the dresser, he took out a small, cheap cashbox. It was unlocked, but he deliberately locked it and tossed the key out of sight on the top shelf of the dresser. He forced it open again with a screw driver, removed and pocketed the money, then threw it down on the floor, beside the handbag.

This seemed about all he could do. It looked pretty good, he thought. He went to the back door, put on his shoes again and went out, leaving the door open and the lights on.

It was lucky he had not come by subway, as he normally did. Plenty of people at the station

knew him. Very well, then, he would hop a bus to Queen's Village and spend an hour or so in the bars—get good and drunk, perhaps. Then he'd come home late by subway. The station attendant would notice him. He'd buy a batch of tokens and would remark that he had been on a pub-crawl, drinking, ever since Jimpson had dropped him off.

Who would find her? With something of a shock, he remembered that her sister Mabel, and Mabel's husband, had arranged to come round after supper, for "a drink or two and watch the fights on T.V."

Well, that was okay—it would make things easier. By the time he got home, the police would be there and he'd have only to stick to his story.

In Queen's Village, over his first double bourbon, he thought of two improvements on his story. First, on his way to this bar, he had noticed a movie, with the name of a picture he had already seen. He would say he had dropped in at this movie, before beginning his pub-crawl.

The second improvement was an answer to the inevitable question—why had he not gone home? Well, he would say he had phoned his wife—they couldn't check that—and told her he'd be late, as he was meeting a business acquaintance for a drink. Tomorrow, first thing, he'd get

hold of Ben Tomlin and reproach him with not having turned up for this appointment. Tomlin was never sober after eight o'clock, and had a memory like a sieve—he wouldn't even try to deny it.

It was in the fourth bar he visited that he switched bourbon to beer. He stood, with a glass in his hand, listening vaguely to the conversation of two very fat men who stood near by.

"Well, I've told her before," said one of the men, "that I won't have all that yack-yack and gossip going on every day in my house. Like a flock of hens, some of these women. You'd think they'd no homes, of their own. So I told her, well, I said, it's got to stop, see?"

"Ah," said the other man weightily. "You can *tell* them."

"That's exactly what I'm getting to. I go in last night, see, after supper, and she's washing

up. 'Have those cackling women been around again?' I says. 'No,' she says. So I say, 'How is it you're washing up four cups and four plates and four of everything?' And then she says . . ."

There was a crash, as a beer glass fell to the floor. The two fat men turned. The man who had held the glass was looking at them, with an expression of horror. But he wasn't seeing them. He was seeing, instead, a little picture, no longer remote but very vivid and real—a picture of a kitchen sink, of washed plates, of unwashed cutlery.

Two of everything! His finger-prints would be on that unwashed cutlery! As he turned and stumbled out, the throbbing in his head came back, harder and angrier than ever. Half an hour later, they removed his body from under a subway train in Queens Village Station.



HAL ELLSON

What lies beneath a sidewalk feud? Sometimes the roots are imbedded in fear sometimes in boredom, sometimes in crime gone awry, sometimes in jealousy for a teen-age tart. Between Buster and Irish, hatred grew from all four causes toward a night of terror that found death at their elbows. It was time to—

Walk Away Fast

RANDY AND ME go to the same school. All kind of kids go there, Irish, Spanish, Colored, even two Chinese. Me, I'm Irish.

Randy's colored. First time I met him I didn't like his guts, and he didn't like mine. We almost had it out, but that's history. Now we get along good. The fact is, he's about the best guy I know.

When vacation rolls around, we don't see each other. A couple of weeks go by, and I run into him. He's out of his territory, I'm out of mine.

We slap hands and talk, mostly about what we've been doing. Nothing's shaking in my neighborhood 'cause the cops are riding the streets too much.

"Yeah, we're hitting the freight yards tonight," Randy says. "Want to be in on it?"

That sounds like excitement and, before I know it, I agree.

"Okay, Irish. You come around tonight," Randy says to me.

"Yeah, suppose your boys don't like the idea?"

"What idea?"

"You know what I mean. Maybe they won't go for it."

"Hell, they got to go for it. You're my friend, and if I say you come in, you come in. That's all there is to it. There ain't no ands, ifs and buts about it."

"But did you tell them, Randy?"

Randy stares at me, gives me a funny look and works his mouth. "To tell the truth; I didn't think about it, Irish. It just didn't enter my mind, but that don't make no difference."

"Not with us, but maybe it will with them."

"Hell, no. We just don't favor punks and flunkies. They're out, and it don't matter what color they are. You ain't a punk or a flunkie, so you're acceptable. Skin don't matter. 'Cause you're white ain't got nothing to do with it. So pick me up at nine. You hear?"

"Yeah, I hear you, Randy."

"Good thing. Slap me five, man."

We slap hands and Randy cuts for his neighborhood. I go back to my own. There's nothing to do around, so I hang on the roof and wait it out till it's time to move.

Eight-thirty rolls around fast, and I hit for the street. It's just starting to get dark, the streets are kind of empty and quiet, shadows coming out of everywhere.

That always gives me a funny feeling, but it's more than that now. Not that I'm scared, but I don't know what's going to happen. Maybe Randy'll clear it, and maybe I'll get my head handed to me on a platter.

It's too late to back-track now. I keep walking, and that tight feeling gets worse in my belly. A lot of crazy ideas pop in my mind, but I push them away.

Only six more blocks to go. By the time I get to Randy's neighborhood, everything's changed. It's dark now, the lights are on and things are kind of noisy.

A guy steps out of a doorway. "Hey, Irish, where you walking?" he says. "Don't you know the number?"

I turn and see it's Randy. He's changed his clothes and is wearing dungarees and a sweatshirt.

"You ready to meet the boys?" he asks.

"That's why I'm here."

"Good stuff. Let's get on. They're waiting on the corner."

From where we are, I can see these guys on the corner. I don't feel so good about that, but I don't say anything.

Randy picks me up and says, "What's wrong, man?"

"Nothing."

"Look, you're with *me*, so you're in like I told you. If anybody got something to say, they got to deal with me."

"Okay, Randy."

"Good. Hold tight, we're reaching them."

We're nearing the corner. I can hear these guys talking and laughing. Then they ain't. They're shut, and everybody's looking. They're staring at me and wondering what I'm doing around here with Randy.

Randy gives them a greeting as we come up. It's like he's talking to a wall. His boys are still staring at me. Especially this big guy with the round head.

Next thing, the big guy puts his hands on his hips and says, "Hey, who's this cat, Randy? What garbage can did you find him in?"

The rest of them laugh but not Randy. He puts his hands on his hips and rocks at this big guy and says, "For your information, Mr. Buster Bophead, I didn't find him. Furthermore, he ain't from no garbage can like some of your family's generations."

"Hey, you're sounding on my family, you square punk."

"And you're sounding on my friend, you four-square flunkie."

The big guy turns to me now and gives me the up-and-down like I'm a hunk of dirt.

"This is the cat you was talk-ing about, Randy?"

"Yeah, Buster."

"He's the one coming along to the yards?"

"He's the one. I didn't have no other in mind."

"Yeah, but this motherjumper is a white stud. You didn't tell us that."

"What's that got to do with it?" Randy says. "Even blind-folded, he's as good a thief as you any day."

The others laugh at that. It kind of breaks the ice, and Buster gives me his hand.

"Okay, man, I just hope you're all Randy says you are. It'll be too bad if you ain't."

I don't say anything to that, and Randy takes over. He introduces me to the others. I shake with them, and they all give me a kind of suspicious look. But that's okay. It's the same as when I moved into my own neighbor-hood and met the guys. It takes a little time to feel things out in any new situation.

Right now there's no time. "Okay," Buster says. "Everybody ready?"

Four guys step out of the

crowd. Buster turns to me. "Know where we're going?" he asks.

"The freight yards."

"You ever bust into any freight cars before?"

"No."

"Hell, I thought you was sup-posed to be a real thief?"

"I've done other kinds of rob-bing."

"Okay, let it pass. Now here's the routine. You follow along and do what's ordered. Behind that is the most important thing. Case you're nabbed, you don't talk, don't give no' names or nothing. It don't matter how them cops beat you. Understand?"

"Yeah."

"Good! 'Cause if you talk, you got us to deal with after, and no-body'll ever know you when we get done chopping you up."

"Okay, Buster," Randy tells him. "You said your speech and my boy ain't the talking type. So let's go before they douse out the streetlamps."

Buster turns away, and we start moving. I keep in step with Randy. Both of us fall a little back, and he pokes me.

"You don't pay him too much mind," he says. "Buster like to talk big, but he ain't so much. Just keep it cool and show him the stuff."

"Okay, Randy."

"How do you feel?"

"Kind of nervous."

"Me, too. Go out on something, and you always get that feeling. Don't have it, and it's no good. It's protection."

We keep moving, come to the park and pass through. It's cooler now, darker here. A girl starts laughing somewhere, and Buster says out loud, "Somebody having his fun tonight."

"Sounds like Carmen," Randy says back.

"Who's Carmen?" I ask Randy.

"That's something tasty. One of them spitfire Spanish chicks. She hangs around with us."

"Pretty?"

"Yeah, you interested?"

"I could be."

"Okay, I'll give you an introduction, and you can take it from there."

We're through the park now, moving faster. Nobody's talking. Ahead of us, it's real dark, but across the river, I can see lights shining, lights on the bridge and cars moving.

We come to a wall, and Buster puts up his hand. "Okay, chuck the butts," he says. "We're here."

Everybody's smoking. Next second the butts are ground out. I'm breathing a little hard, and my legs feel tight.

Buster leans over the wall and swings around. "Empty freight car just below. Okay, we jump one at a time. Anybody makes noise is going to suffer bad. When we catch what we want, we op-

erate in twos. Two go in a car, two stay at the door for unloading and two watch at each end of the car for the yard bulls. Got it?"

Everybody's got it. Buster vaults up on the wall, stands a second and jumps. There's a soft thump, and the next guy goes up.

Me and Randy are last. "Hit it, boy," Randy tells me. "I'll follow you down."

I hop up on the wall, look down and it's all black. There's like nothing below, then I make out a shadow. That's the freight car.

"Man, hurry it," Randy says behind me. "I hear somebody coming."

I jump and land hard, knock my chin against my knees. A second later, Randy drops beside me.

"Hey, you like to wake up the world, Irish. What happened?"

"That drop was bigger than I thought."

"Okay, let's get down."

We move along the top of the car to the back, climb down an iron ladder and drop to the roadbed.

The others are waiting. "Damn, you got to make all that noise, new boy?" Buster says. "You trying to get us caught?"

I don't know what to say, but Randy comes in for me. "Hold your fat mouth," he tells Buster. "That was me."

"Yeah, you can't jump better than that, balloon-head?"

"Shut your face, Buster. Somebody was coming, and I had to make a quick jump."

Buster shuts. Nobody's talking now, 'cause, up above, somebody's making noise. We hear a girl laugh, and this guy yakking like he's alone in the world.

"It ain't the cops," Buster says.

We start moving. Buster takes the lead, and we walk single file. It's dark as hell down here, darker than in the park, and real quiet now.

I'm real tight in the belly, sweat's making my clothes stick. We keep moving for maybe fifty yards, but it feels like a mile.

"Okay, this is it," Buster says.

I don't see anything, then I do. There's a line of freight cars. They look like shadows.

Buster grabs my arm. "Move up to the end of the first car, Mick. Keep your eyes and ears open for the yard bulls and let's know if they're coming."

He gives me a push, and I head for the end of the freight car. Somebody else takes the front end. I don't see who. The others move in for the kill.

I'm standing alone in the dark. There's a couple of shadows near the door of the freight car. A soft clicking starts, then a kind of rumble follows. Two shadows move, go up through the freight car door.

Seeing that is kind of scaring. But I'm not supposed to be looking at them. I turn the other way and watch. There's nothing to see but shadows, and they make me jumpy. The sweat's getting cold on me.

It's quiet as hell, just a few little sounds come from the freight car. They must be unloading something good.

I still got my back turned when somebody touches me. I jump and get set to fly, but it's Randy, and he holds me.

"Man, take it easy," he tells me. "You're hopped up."

"Okay, then don't sneak up like that."

He laughs soft. "Just wanted to see how you was doing. The boys is catching a load of stuff. Keep an eye."

Randy leaves me and goes back to his post. I swing around. Everything's the same as before — all dark. Still, I could swear I saw a light flash. I'm not breathing now, not doing anything but staring and listening, but I can't see anything, and all I hear is my goddam heart beating.

I'm scared, that's all. I tell myself that, and then I hear this soft crunching sound like somebody's walking on ashes. But when I look, I don't see anything.

The noise stops. Then it starts again. I know it's real now, and I look through the space between the freight cars.

A light flashes in my face and blinds me. I duck it, let out a yell and start running.

Everybody's running now, and it's all black. Somebody's yelling behind for us to stop, but we don't stop.

We reach the freight car near the wall, scramble to the top and boost each other up the wall. I'm last up. Randy hangs on the wall. I grab on to him and pull myself up, then help him.

Down below, a light's playing around in the dark. We watch it till it goes out. Nobody talks for a while. Everybody's sucking wind.

Buster catches his breath first. His hand comes out and grabs a fistful of my shirt.

"Man, why the hell did you holler out like that? I ought to throw you down to the yard bull and let him eat your head off."

I grab Buster's wrist so he don't rip off my shirt and tell him, "What did you expect me to do? He was on us."

"Yeah, cause you wasn't watching."

"The hell I wasn't! He came from the other side of the cars."

"That don't matter. You didn't do it cool."

I'm about to answer that, but Randy comes in for me and says, "Okay, it's over. Let's drop it."

Buster lets go of my shirt and turns to Randy. "Yeah, you're the one I ought to bust. This pale-face cat is your boy."

"Yeah, he's my boy, so start busting if you think you're so bad," Randy tells him, and he moves in.

But the others grab both of them now and break it up. One named Beaver says, "This ain't the time and place to whale. Besides, them canteloupes is back under that freight car yet. Do we wait it out and go back for them, or don't we?"

"Hell, the yard bull'll be waiting around all night to shoot up somebody's butt," Buster says. "I ain't for going back tonight."

That's the verdict. Nobody's for going back, so we swing through the park and hit the sidewalks.

Buster starts blowing off about me again, and Randy and him have words. After that, we split. The others go one way, and me and Randy walk off by ourselves.

For a while we don't talk, but I have to say something, and finally I get it out.

"You shouldn't have asked me to come in on it. I blew the deal, Randy."

"Yeah, that could happen to any one."

"But it was me."

"You shouldn't have hollered, that's all. We could have moved fast and quiet before the yard bull came up and got off with a load of stuff."

"But he was up, and he threw that light right in my face from the other side of the car."

"You didn't hear him coming?"

"When it was too late."

"Well, it's done. It ain't the first time we lost out, so don't worry about it."

"Your boys must be real sore."

"Don't worry about them, either," said Randy.

"Maybe I better not come around any more."

"Why not?"

"You heard Buster."

"Don't let that pale-face stuff bother you. He just don't know any better, but he'll learn."

We keep walking, and when we get tired of that, we hop a truck, ride straight into my neighborhood and swing off around the corner from my house. Randy walks me to the door and takes off for home. I go upstairs.

Television's on when I walk in. The Old Man is watching the fights and drinking beer.

"Where've you been all night?"

"Out."

"Out where?"

"To the park. Where's Mom?"

"At your aunt's."

That's all. He lets it go at that, 'cause he's too interested in the fights. I move off to my room, flop on the bed and stretch out. Half an hour later, the old lady comes in, opens my door and blasts me for laying on the bed in my clothes.

"Okay, okay," I tell her. "You don't have to holler."

She slams the door and I take off my clothes, get back in bed and fall asleep listening to the sound of traffic from the avenue.

II

NEXT MORNING it's boiling hot. A yellow light comes through the window. I turn away from it, face the wall. I lay still, close my eyes again and figure to get up about noon, 'cause there's nothing to be done this morning.

Maybe ten minutes pass when I hear a whistle. Only one guy can whistle like that, but I tell myself it can't be Randy.

The whistle sounds again, and I turn around and squint against the light. It's Randy all right. Sounds like he's on the roof, but he can't be.

The hell he can't. He gives another blast, and I have to get up and go to the window. But I don't look out. I'm too tired to see him, so I go back to bed.

A few minutes later, Randy whacks me on the can. It's a real stinger. I hop out of bed and curse him out.

Randy laughs. "Hey, watch your language, Irish."

"Okay, what's up?"

"There ain't nothing up that I know about."

"How'd you get in?"

"By way of the fire escape and through the window. You described it good, and I thought I'd try it when you didn't answer."

"Yeah, I was sleeping peacefully."

"And now you ain't. It's after nine. Jump into your clothes, and we'll hit the street."

"What for?"

"Cause it's today. Come on, man. Don't be so lazy."

My eyes are open wider now. Sleeping's out. Randy ain't going to leave, and there's no use arguing the point.

"Okay," I tell him, and I grab my pants and pull them on.

"Nothing's doing, Randy?"

"Nothing special."

"I thought something was up."

"You didn't have enough last night?"

I remember that all right, and my face goes red. Randy notices and gives me a big grin.

"Yeah, you remember."

"It was too close for comfort. That yard bull could have put his hand out and touched me."

"If he got his hand on you, you wouldn't be able to sit for a week. Them guys don't fool around when they catch you. And when they finish up, they turn you over to the cops, just for the fun of it."

"That figures."

Randy turns away, and I finish dressing. When I'm all set, he's standing at the window.

"You ready to blow?" he asks.

"I didn't have breakfast yet."

"Yeah, neither did I, but I brought some stuff along. It's on the roof."

"Anything good?" I ask him.

"Milk and buns. I hooked it early this morning."

"That sounds all right. Let's get it before it's gone."

The quickest way is through the window and up the fire escape. We take that route, reach the tar, open the bag and dig in.

The milk is kind of warm, but the buns are fresh and tasty. We knock off the half a dozen each, then flip the empty milk bottle at a cat down in the yard.

There's nothing to hold us now, and Randy says, "Let's breeze, man. It's empty up here."

"Where do we go?"

"No place special. Let's walk around and see the sights."

We hit for the street, walk around and finally we're back in Randy's neighborhood. It's kind of quiet, so we end up on his roof and look over his pigeons.

It's a good coop and the birds are okay. They're mostly Flights and Tumblers.

"I see you go for Flights, Randy."

"That's right. They're the best on the wing."

"Could be, but I like Tumblers most."

"Why?" asked Randy.

"I like the way they flip over and do all that acrobatic stuff."

"Yeah, they're good like that. How come you ain't got no birds?"

"There's too many thieves

around my block. You got a flock today and tomorrow they're gone."

"Thieves is all over, Irish. But I got a big lock on my coop and a heavy door. Behind that, I got an alarm that rings off in my bedroom. Somebody fools around with my coop, the alarm buzzes and I'm up the fire escape with a two-head axe. One time I caught a guy and near to threwed him off the roof."

"How come you didn't?"

"Hell, he was only a small stud, and he cried like a baby. I hung him over the side just to scare him, and kicked his butt good. Stuff like that gets around the neighborhood, and others ain't too anxious to try to get my birds."

"Yeah, you have to protect your property."

We're still talking about pigeons and stuff when the roof door slams open. Buster and the guys we were with last night step out on the tar.

"Hey, look who's still around," Buster says. "You slept with the pigeons last night, Irish?"

The others laugh, but Randy tells him, "Lay off. He's got a home same as you."

"You still sticking your nose in for him, Randy?"

"Yeah, all the way."

"What for?"

"Cause four is after three and in front of five."

Buster shakes his head. He

don't like me, and he don't go for the idea of Randy being on my side. I can see that good. The others are on the fence.

Buster lights up, looks at me again and shakes his head. I figure it's time to talk up, so I ask him what's wrong.

"Lots is wrong, man. If you didn't lose your nerve last night, we'd have pulled off the job okay."

I can't answer that, but Randy talks up for me. "Hell, it was his first time, Buster."

"That ain't got to do with it. First or last, he didn't have no right to holler and run. That was the punk showing."

"Yeah, who says he's a punk?"

"You heard me talk."

"Then how come you ran? Why did we all cut out?"

That stops Buster for a second, but he ain't through. He's ready to explode. "I still say he punked."

He gets that out, but Randy tells him, "Then all of us did."

"He don't belong with us. I don't want him along when we go out again."

"That ain't for you to say, Buster."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Buster and Randy stare at each other like they're ready to jump. I hope they don't clash, but I get a good feeling out of this, 'cause Randy's standing up for me.

Buster can't stare Randy down, so he turns to the others. "You guys want a punk along?" he asks.

The others look at me. They don't seem too sure of anything, but I know they haven't forgotten last night.

"He should have held," Beaver says.

"Yeah, the way you did. You were first over the wall, I noticed," Randy tells him.

We're back on that again, and the fact is I was scared. Even Randy knows that, but he's sticking up for me. That's all right, but he's hurting himself with the others.

I try to tell him that, and he won't listen.

He waves his hand at me and says, "It was his first time, and he didn't know the setup good as us."

"All the more reason why he should have held ground," Buster answers. "But he got scared and took off. Only punks take off."

I don't mind the others, but this Buster talks too much. There's too much of that punk business from him, so I say, "I'm no punk like you think."

He turns and grins at me. "Man, then why'd you run like a scared cat?"

"Because it just happened that way. I didn't expect the yard bull to flash the light in my face."

"Then you ain't a punk. Is that right?"

"It'd take more than you to prove I am."

"That sounds like big talk."

"It ain't talk!"

"Okay, it ain't." Buster gives me a big smile. "In that case, we can try you out and see. You want to take the test?"

He's got me. I should have kept my mouth shut, but it's too late now. I'm in the trap.

"What's the test?" I ask him.

"The Arena."

"What's that?"

"A place we use for tests, to see who's got guts and who ain't."

I look at Randy, but he's got nothing to say now. The others are smiling.

"Yeah, to the Arena," Beaver says, and the rest of them pick that up. They start chanting it.

Buster lifts his hand. "Okay, that's enough on that stuff. This ain't no time for entertainment."

The others shut, and he turns to me. "You willing to take the test, Irish? Nobody's forcing you or nothing like that. It's a free choice you got. You can back out if you want."

He says that easy, like he's ready to give me out. But that's bull. There's no out. This is a challenge to see if I'll punk out, and I can't punk out. If I do, I know what's going to happen.

I look him straight in the eye and say, "Okay, what's the test?"

"You'll find out when you get there. You ready to take it?"

For a second I'm kind of scared. Anything can happen. Maybe they've got a pistol, and it's going to be Russian roulette. That's one way I don't intend to die.

Maybe Randy'll give me a sign. I turn to him, but he don't say anything. His face is blank, but I know he's waiting like the others. The decision is up to me.

"Okay, I'm ready," I say.

"Good," Buster says. "Let's go."

We move down from the roof and head for the corner. A candy store is there, and some girls are hanging around outside.

As soon as they see us, they stop talking and watch. We come on. Buster's walking ahead with Switch. They both stop in front of the candy store and wait for me to come up.

"Want to get a last drink before the test?" Buster asks me. "You're going to do a lot of sweating."

That's a play to scare me. I know that, but I take him up anyhow. We move into the candy store. The girls are staring. Nobody gives them a tumble.

They're strange to me, I'm strange to them, so all eyes are on me. A couple are real dogs, some are pretty. Two are Spanish. One is a real looker.

We find stools inside and order up. Nobody inside's talking, but outside I can hear the girls yakking.

Next thing, this Spanish one comes in, and Buster turns on her. "What do you want, nosey?" he asks her.

She shrugs her shoulders. Her eyes go to me and back to Buster. "What's up?"

"Nothing for you to know, so take yourself a walk out to the front."

She just smiles, looks at me again and goes out, shaking her can behind her.

"That's Carmen," Randy says to me. "It looks like she's got eyes for you already."

"Yeah," Buster comes in with, "you're the handsome type. But maybe you won't be around for her to look at after the test."

I don't answer that. It's best not to. Buster's burned already, and the way Carmen looked me over ain't helping the matter.

We finish our drinks and blow out of the candy store. The girls are waiting. Carmen's leaning back against the paper-stand with a cigarette in her mouth. She takes it out, blows smoke in my face as I pass and one of the ugly ones says, "Hey, he's a pretty boy."

We're twenty paces away, and another chick calls out, "If you're taking him for the test, bring him back in one piece."

There's laughing behind us then. I fall back, keep in step with Randy and say, "Where're we heading?"

"We're going to the bridge."

"What's the Arena?" I ask him.

"That's under the bridge—a beam. You got to cross it."

"What's so tough about that?"

"You'll see when you get there, Irish. Not that it's so hard to cross, but if you ain't used to it, it can scare hell out of you."

That cools me, 'cause if Randy thinks the Arena is tough, then it's got to be.

"But why do they call it the Arena?" I ask him.

"It's like this. Sometimes, two of the guys have it out. I mean, when they really want to put the buzz on each other. They go up on the beam and fight it out with leather belts. It don't happen much, I can tell you that, 'cause it's easy to get yourself killed if you fall."

"That sounds crazy."

"It is, man. It's real crazy."

"Anybody ever get killed?"

"Not yet. But a year ago, a guy who ain't around here no more almost had it. He slipped on the beam. That took all the fight out of him. He quit the crowd after that and didn't come around no more."

That's enough to hear. I don't ask any more questions. We're halfway to the bridge, and nobody's talking now.

No one says anything till we reach the bridge. Then Buster holds up his hand.

"Everybody keep shut from here on in," he says. "We don't

want the copper on the bridge to bust this up."

We swing around to the side of the bridge now and come to a wall. That's easy to scale. We're over it in a second and standing on ground that slopes to the river.

Next to us is the bridge. Traffic's moving on it. I look up, then out. That bridge is big, and that's a real jump it makes across the river.

We move along a concrete wall and come to this rope that's dangling from above. Buster reaches it first, grabs hold and starts pulling himself up. The others follow. I'm last.

I reach the top and find myself under the belly of the bridge. There's no sun now. Everything's shadow and kind of cool. Traffic's moving overhead. I hear it, and all kind of echoes go bouncing around. Everything else is gone. Up here is like a separate world from the outside.

We're fifteen feet above the bank, standing on this concrete that's like a walk. Buster waves us on, and we move out along the walk, come to the end and stop.

Ahead, are thick girders laying crosswise. They go out as far as the river and meet two big columns.

I'm looking out. Then I drop my eyes and catch my breath. It's about seven stories down, maybe a little more.

I look away fast and catch Buster's face. He's watching me and grinning. "Okay, Irish, this is it. You ready to begin?"

I still don't know exactly what's expected of me. But I don't have long to find out. Buster raises his hand and points out at a cross-beam. "You go out to it and walk across it. That's all."

I'm shaking now, sorry I came along, but I've got no choice. There's no going back, so I brace myself. It don't do much good, 'cause my heart's beating like anything.

"Don't let it throw you, Irish," Randy says behind me. "But if you can't do it, don't try. Don't take the chance."

I don't answer. The fact is, I can't, but I ain't punking out either. The trouble is, I can't move now, 'cause I know where I am, and what can happen if I fall.

It feels kind of cold around me. The shadows are greyer. A cool wind touches me. It makes a weird sound. Then I hear these echoes. They're from above. Traffic's still moving up there. The noise bothers me.

I look down again. It's marshy below. A couple of dead pigeons are laying there.

"Hey, don't be looking down," Randy tells me. "You're going to be scaring yourself."

I don't answer. A truck backfires overhead, and I jump. The

others start laughing, and more echoes start bouncing around me.

Buster's kept his mouth shut, but now he says, "What's wrong, Irish? You ain't got the guts?"

I know he's giving me the needle to throw me, but it don't happen that way. I'm burned instead.

"Don't let him bug you," Randy says.

I look behind at him and nod my head. He's for me all the way, and that's a good feeling. But words ain't going to take me where I have to go.

Buster comes in with another crack, and I start moving out toward the beam.

"Don't look down, Irish."

That's Randy again, and that's all. Nobody else talks and it gets real quiet. They're watching to see what happens.

It's not too much getting out to the beam. A couple of seconds, and I'm there.

I glance back at the others. That's the wrong thing to do, 'cause they seem so safe and far away. All of them have the same kind of face, and none of them say anything. That's how I know I'm in danger.

And that makes me look down again. This time it's different. Standing on the beam does that. It makes the drop seem worse. I get a sick feeling in my belly, and I'm icy all over.

The others are waiting to see if I'll chicken out. I feel chicken,

real scared, but I can't go back.

I got my eyes glued on the beam now, and it looks narrower than before. If I keep looking maybe it'll get skinnier yet, so I take a step.

It's no good. I'm shaking like a leaf. I can't trust myself. Jelly's inside me. I'm numb all over and ready to quit.

"Yeah, he's scared, ready to punk out."

That's Buster talking, and he's right. I *am* scared, but what he says holds me there. I got to show him I can cross the beam, but I know I can't walk it.

That's out. I bend down, sit on the beam and get my legs around it. Next, I swing my legs up and lay out with my hands holding the steel.

Maybe the others didn't expect this, but they don't say anything, and finally I start crawling.

I crawl on my belly like a worm. The steel's hard, sweat's running, and my heart's thumping.

That's the worst of it, hearing that sound growing louder and louder. Next, I hear the echo and it's like somebody's beating a bass-drum over my head.

It's so real, I stop crawling and look around. Soon as I do that I realize where I am—halfway across the beam and seven stories up.

I shut my eyes quick, hold tight and start crawling again. Now my

insides are twisting up. I feel all bruised, and I'm telling myself I'm never going to make it.

While I'm saying that, there's a yell and somebody grabs me. I open my eyes, look up and see Randy.

"Steady. You made it, Irish."

I try to smile and can't. Randy helps me to my feet.

"Follow me. You can do it easy, man."

I follow him, but I don't feel safe till I step on the concrete walk. Everybody's around then, shaking my hand. All except Buster.

"Hell, he didn't do it," he says.

"What do you mean, he didn't?"

"He didn't walk. He crawled on his goddam belly like a worm."

"So what? He crossed it, and that's the test."

Buster looks around for support, but the others side with Randy. That gets him wild, and he keeps talking. When he don't get nowhere, he swings around and walks off by himself.

"Yeah, let him go. He's a hot-head," Randy says. "You passed the test, Irish."

Maybe so, but I'm wondering about that. I didn't walk the beam. I crawled on my belly.

"Okay, let's get out of this," Randy says. "The show is over."

There's nothing to keep us, so we start back along the concrete

walk, reach the place where the rope's hanging and go down it to the bank. From there we move to the street and stop.

"Who's for the freight yards?" Randy says.

Everybody is but me. I shake my head, and Randy asks me what's wrong.

"I'm pooped and my guts hurt from crawling on the beam. I'm going home."

It's a good enough excuse. Nobody kicks, and the others head for the freight yards. I walk off alone, stop and look back. Randy and the others are out of sight already. I wait there, my mind made up. Then I start back for the bridge.

A few minutes later I'm at the end of the concrete walk under the bridge. It's quieter now without the others, the grey light weird. That wind sounds stronger.

I don't have to do this, that's what I know. Maybe I'm nuts, I tell myself. But I think of what Buster said.

He's right. I crawled on my belly like a worm. But I don't have to. I got to show him that.

Yeah. I look down below and shiver. If I fall, nobody's going to know, I tell myself.

Thinking like that is bad, and I'm ready to take a powder. I even start back the way I came, then catch myself.

It's too late again. I'm here, and I can't go back.

Don't look down—that's the idea. What Randy said.

Seconds later I'm out on the beam. Sweat's running again. I don't look down this time, don't think of anything.

One step starts it, and I keep going till I'm across the beam. Hey, I'm laughing! A little scared, but laughing, 'cause that was easy.

Hell, I got it beat. Wait till next time, and I'll show them.

A pigeon flaps in under the bridge and settles on the side of a girder. That means a nest is there.

I walk out and the pigeon flaps off. There's a nest all right. A couple of eggs in it. I let them be and go back to the concrete walk just as two more pigeons swoop in under the bridge. There must be plenty around. I keep that in mind, light a cigarette and start back for home.

III

NEXT MORNING, I run over to Randy's and catch him on the roof flying his pigeons. It's hot already, so he sends them for a short run and brings them in.

After that we sit and light up. Talk gets around to yesterday and he asks me how my belly is.

"I give him a grin and say, 'Fine.'"

"Yeah, what's the grin for?"

"I went back."

"What are you talking?" Randy says.

"Yesterday after you guys went to the freight yards I went back on the bridge."

"What for? You didn't have enough?"

"Maybe not. Maybe it was crazy, but I had to prove something."

"You already proved."

"Not to myself."

"You walked the beam?"

"Right. As long as I didn't look down it was okay. Now it's like nothing. I mean it's kind of exciting. You know what else?"

"What?"

"There must be a million pigeons up under that bridge."

"Yeah, all dirty old clinkers," Randy says. "You can't fly them bums, but there's some change to be made selling them."

"I could use some money. But how do we sell them?"

"Easy. I got customers lined up. Chinese laundry men are best. A couple of old ladies also is regular buyers on my route."

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

"Nothing, but let me get a box to carry the clinkers."

Randy gets the box, and we go down on the street.

Carmen's standing at the candy store, leaning against the paper stand. This time she's alone. Our eyes meet. She keeps staring, takes the cigarette out of her mouth, blows smoke and puts it back.

"Introduce me," I say to Randy.

He accommodates when we reach her. She plays it cool now and keeps the cigarette in her mouth.

I snap it out, drop it and step on it.

"What's that for?" she asks me.

"For blowing smoke in my face yesterday. Remember?"

"You didn't like it?"

"I don't let any dame get away with that."

Carmen smiles, takes out her pack, puts another cigarette in her mouth and lifts her face.

"Got a light, Irish?"

"Sure."

I lighted her up and ask her how come she knows my name.

"The boys were talking about you. I heard you passed the test."

"You know about that?"

"Sure. I suppose you're going to be around from now on?"

"That's right. How about you?"

"I'm always around."

"Then maybe I'll see you."

"Maybe." Carmen says that with a smile, takes a puff on her cigarette and blows smoke in my face again.

This time I don't mind. I let it pass, and Randy tugs on my arm.

"Man, we got business. Let's get with it."

We leave Carmen and head for the avenue to look up customers. While we're walking Randy says,

"You made a fast play for that."

"Make it fast or not at all.
That's my motto."

"She liked that."

"You think so?"

"I know so," Randy says.
"That was a good play, when you chucked her cigarette and stomped it. Somebody else'd be patching up scratch-marks on his face."

"She's cute but wild. Is that it?"

"You really interested in her, Irish?"

"I might be."

"Maybe it's best if you don't get involved."

"Why?"

"She's too easy. Know what I mean? Them too easy kind ain't never any good."

"Hell, I'm not going to marry her."

"Yeah, I know," Randy says.

He switches the subject then and we come to this laundry. The Chinaman is ironing and looks up as we walk in. He's a fat guy with a round face that lights up when he spots Randy.

"Want any pigeons today?" Randy asks.

The Chinaman holds up three fingers. We move on out and pick up some more orders, enough to put money in our pockets. Then we head for the bridge.

The rest is easy. There's pigeons all over the bridge, nests on the sides of girders and in the

corners where they meet. One place in a groove along the concrete wall is lousy with them.

We scale down a pipe and grab what we want, tie their feet together and drop them to the ground below. Young ones can't fly. They're just soft and lumpy.

When we get enough we go down the rope, put them in the box and hike for the payoff.

First stop is the fat Chinaman. He throws us a buck, and we're outside. That's when Randy says, "There's another thing I forgot to tell you, Irish."

"What's that?"

"Buster kind of likes Carmen."

"He owns her?"

"Not exactly," Randy says.

"So what, then?"

"You might find yourself clashing head on."

"That's okay with me. Everybody else is all right in your clique, but Buster don't go down."

"I just wanted to let you know the score. That's all."

"Thanks, Randy."

We go on, deliver the rest of the pigeons, split the money, then ride downtown to Times Square and take in a big show.

Night time, after supper, I'm back in Randy's neighborhood. We sit on his stoop and smoke and talk.

Things liven up after a while. Guys and girls gather at the corner. We move that way. The juke's squalling in the candy store.

We drift inside. Some kids are dancing in the back. We have a coke and watch.

A few minutes later, Carmen comes bouncing in. She's wearing tight dungarees, a tighter sweater. I get a hello and that's all.

She moves to the back, and I turn to Randy, look at him.

"What's that action?"

"You don't know, Irish?"

"You know her better than I do."

"Okay, she wants you to come in the back."

"Anything doing back there?"

"Not too much," Randy says. "but you can make the play and take it from there."

"It's easy as that?"

"Yeah, it ain't hard. But like I told you, watch out for Buster."

"He don't bother me at all."

Randy gets up from the stool. "Okay, it's all yours. I'll give you a tip. Get a couple of cans of beer. She goes for that stuff like a pig."

"Then what?"

"My roof's a good place. Behind the coop. The pigeons don't mind."

"Where do I get the beer?"

"See the man behind the counter. He always got a supply in the back at thirty-five cents a throw. See you later, champ."

He moves out, and I go to the back. Carmen's sitting in a booth, waiting with an unlit cigarette. I light her up and start dealing, figuring on a little resistance.

There's none. Ten minutes later we're up on Randy's roof behind the pigeon coop. Half an hour later we're down again.

Randy's leaning against the paper stand when we come up. A girl is with him. Switch walks out of the store with a chick on his arm.

In two seconds, I'm introduced to the girls and invited to go to Coney Island.

It's a pretty long trip this late. I mention that, and Switch says, "Don't let it worry you. We got a fast car tonight."

"Yeah, whose is it?"

"Don't ask no questions, and you get no lies told to you," Randy answers.

I don't say any more, and we all move around the corner and up the block a way, where this flashy job is parked.

Switch opens the doors. We climb in like it's bought and paid for.

It's Tally-ho then, and we're off for Coney. . . .

Next day, I don't show in Randy's neighborhood till late in the afternoon. A stickball game is going on. Buster's at bat. Girls are sitting on car mudguards and watching.

I breeze up and Carmen bounces off a car and throws her arms around me. That kind of breaks up the game.

Everybody's laughing, but not Buster. He comes charging at me.

I push Carmen aside, and we lock head on, get a few licks in.

The guys break it up quick. But that don't stop Buster from talking. It's all about me cutting in on him with Carmen.

That figures, but I don't give a crap and tell him so.

"Yeah, talk don't change things. We're going to have it out," he says.

"Name the time and place."

"You want to go to the Arena?"

I'm not expecting that, but I can't back away.

"Okay, the Arena, Buster."

It's done then. Everybody's excited but two guys, Randy and Beaver. They start trying to talk us out of it.

It's no dice. We're both hot. Talking don't do any good, so everything is set. Short rubber hoses are brought instead of belts.

Only four of us can go to the Arena. Me, Buster, Randy and Beaver. We take off in pairs.

All the way there Randy keeps saying, "You sure you want to go through with this?"

I want to, I tell him, but I'm scared, and that's what I don't tell him.

When we reach the bridge, Randy says, "I warned you about this, Irish, but you was stupid. You fell for it."

"Fell for what?"

"Hell, why do you think Carmen threw her arms around you?

That was the come-on for both of you to fight over the bitch. She thinks that's romantic. Don't go through with it."

"It's too late, Randy."

"Okay, you're the boss."

We jump the wall and go to the rope, climb up on the bridge. Buster's ahead of me. Taps on his shoes click on the concrete walk.

We go all the way to the end. Randy hands us the rubber hoses and we're set.

Buster goes out first on the beam. I follow. We're facing each other.

"You ready, you bastard?" he says.

"Yeah, any time you are."

That starts it. We move across the beam and close in. I'm scared, shaking, twisted in the guts and all screwed up. Everything inside me moves.

Neither of us make a move. We just stand there, watch each other and wait.

"Swing out, motherjumper," Buster finally says.

"Yeah, you swing. You swung first before."

We keep it up like that, but nobody makes a move till Beaver talks up and says, "Who's going to start it? There ain't all day."

"I'm waiting for the punk."

I'm still scared, but when Buster says that I make a move, catch him on the leg with the hose, and then across the belly.

That's all. He gives a yell, goes down, hits the beam and grabs.

I move in fast to help, hold him and Randy comes out to give a hand. When we go to pull him he lets out a yell that it hurts.

"What the hell, you want us to leave you out here? Get up and shut up," Randy tells him. "You want the cop upstairs to hear?"

Buster stays shut now, and we get him up. Randy guides him back to the concrete walk and then he dives on it, hits it flat and starts crying.

We pull him aside, let him lay a while. Randy has a look at his leg then. There's a big scrape and he's bleeding a bit.

Getting him down the rope is tough, but we make it and take him back to his house. That's as far as we go. He's got to climb upstairs by himself and make his own excuses.

I'm still scared when it's all over, too shaky to hang around or even light a butt.

"Got to go," I tell Randy.

"You're shook up?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, I'll see you around, Irish."

It's three days before I show up in Randy's block again. A stickball game is going on. Buster's playing with a limp.

"How's the leg?" I say.

"Coming along, Irish."

"I'm sorry that had to happen."

"That's okay. It had to be one of us."

He smiles and puts out his hand. We shake, and it's all over for good. Buster gets up to bat, and I step in to run bases for him till the game is finished.

We move into the candy store for cokes then, and Randy shows up.

He's got a funny look on his face, so I call him on it, and he turns to Buster.

"You're both tight now?" he asks him.

"Real tight."

"Okay, should I tell him?"

"Tell him."

Randy turns to me. "It's about that Carmen bitch. You fought for nothing, both of you."

"Say what you mean, Randy."

"She's going out with another stud, and you're both out in the cold."

I look at Buster, and he looks at me. Neither of us say anything till later, and we set it up. Both of us know what we got to do.

Eleven o'clock rolls around, and we're both standing in front of Carmen's stoop when she rolls down the street alone.

That's the ticket. I grab her arm and twist her around when she tries to go past. Buster drops a garbage can over her head and we both start punching.

We punch her out, leave her crying on the sidewalk and walk away fast.

KENNETH FEARING

Drink was no problem for Brown — his troubles were slow horses and women too fast at beating a path to the altar. But it was his spouses' unforeseen fondness for cyanide cocktails that plunged Brown into the alphabet soup.

Three Wives Too Many

RICHARD C. BROWN gazed in contented speculation across the breakfast table at the plain but pleasant face of his wife Marion. He was aware not only of her companionable silence, but savored also the cozy perfection of the tiny alcove, in fact, the homey restfulness of the entire bungalow.

For a moment, he almost regretted the need to leave this suburban idyll on the outskirts of Camden, and Marion, in order to reach his home in Newark by nightfall, and to be with Bernice, his fourth and most recent wife, at the usual hour. But he knew that domestic peace, to say nothing of his own safety, depended upon the most rigid adherence to his fixed routine.

Bernice, a natural and vivacious blonde, was much younger and very much prettier than Marion, whose tightly combed hair showed an unmistakable tinge of gray in its otherwise inky dark-

ness. Marion, in fact, was the wife Richard had who was as old as himself. When he married her, he had rather felt he was making a reckless gamble.

But now, after four years—no, come to think of it, five years—he felt she had turned out extraordinarily well. Whereas Bernice, he had to face it, still couldn't cook, after almost a year of marriage. Her cooking, like her disorderly housekeeping, would probably never improve.

Still, she was lively, and decorative, though by no means as gorgeous as the ripe, still magnificently cream-skinned and red-haired Lucille. Lucille was his first wife, and although nowadays she was showing more and more ill temper, especially when she drank, he was still very fond of her, and they still maintained their original home in Hartford.

He would be seeing her, on schedule, three days hence. After that, came the turn of the

dark, brooding, capricious Helen, his second, in a suburb of Boston. Helen was a little extravagant. She always had been. But what were a few faults? They were only to be expected. After all, he probably had a few, himself.

So Richard C. Brown speculated, as he often did, weighing the pros and cons of this life he led.

Had he chosen wisely in selecting matrimony as his profession? Richard frowned, faintly, and softened the harsh phraseology of the question. He hadn't *chosen* it, exactly. He had drifted into it, beginning as an ardent, even a romantic, amateur. It was so easy to get married that he had not even thought of that vulgar word, bigamy, until some time after he had already committed it.

But after two ceremonies, with a third impending—his match with Marion—yes, by then he had realized he was launched upon a special type of career, one that might have certain risks attached, but one that also, with care and prudence, offered rich rewards.

"Richard? Is that what's worrying you?"

Richard returned his attention to Marion, suddenly aware that her voice echoed a whole series of remarks he had not quite caught. Richard smiled, genuinely surprised.

"Worrying me, dear?"

"For a minute, you were frowning. I thought perhaps your mind

was on that offer to buy the house and lot. It was such a *big* price the broker offered, I could hardly believe it. I thought maybe you regretted turning it down. I wonder if you did it just on my account, even though you thought it was really a mistake to pass up the chance. Was *that* it, Richard?"

Richard was still more surprised—honestly surprised, and deeply touched.

"No, nothing's worrying me," he said, in affectionate rebuke. "Least of all, that proposition to sell. I'd forgotten all about it."

Marion, pouring him a second cup of coffee, pursued the subject to its logical end. "Because, if the offer is still open, and you think we ought to sell, I'll sign. Our joint title to the deed, I mean. Perhaps you thought I sounded unwilling before. But that was only because I didn't really understand what a wonderful price we were being offered."

Richard was mildly amused, but still more moved. The offered price had been quite good, certainly, but by no means high enough to justify the nuisance of finding or building another place, then moving and getting established.

"No," he said, firmly. "I'm quite happy here, and we won't think of selling, unless you've changed your own mind, and that's what you want, yourself." With large and patient generosity, he empha-

sized the point. "Since I have to be away so much, on business, I've always felt any decision about the house should be mainly up to you. That's why I insisted, from the first, that title to the property should be in both our names."

He did not add, though he privately noted the fact and gave himself a good mark for it, that this was one of his fixed rules for lasting success in marriage on a mass basis. Never play the domestic tyrant, he often told himself. Let the little woman—which ever one it was, though Lucille and Helen were hardly little—make most of the household decisions, or at least imagine she made them. It kept her happy and, whenever he had to make an important move, made her all the more amiable in deferring to him.

Sometimes, at moments like this, Richard wished he had some friendly, professional colleague with whom he could talk over the finer problems of, say, quadruple and concurrent matrimony. But this could never be. Richard did not doubt that superior operators, like himself, were in existence. But they were not readily to be found—any more than he himself was.

There were only two types of repeaters the public ever heard about, and Richard disdained them both. On the one hand, he was no idiot Romeo who married seven or eight pretty but pen-

niless young things, usually in the same region if not the same city, and inevitably came to grief on some absurd but mathematically predictable mischance. Love was the key-word to describe this type, love and carelessness.

Then there was the other well-publicized practitioner, the sinister Bluebeard who, having married for money alone, then proceeded to do away with. . . . No, this gruesome technique so revolted Richard he shrank even from thinking about it.

Marriage should be undertaken only for money *and* love. Richard imagined himself giving this sage advice to some earnest young man who might appeal to him for guidance, before choosing this specialized vocation as his own life-work. Marry for money *and* love, and never relax one's careful attention in fostering each, that was what Richard would tell the acolyte.

Quite carried away by the thought, Richard crumpled his napkin and slapped it down beside his breakfast plate in brisk, executive encouragement. Of course, there were hundreds of other facets to such a career, minor perhaps, but highly important. There was the choice of employment one should pretend to have, for instance, the changes of identification that would never overlap, and . . . Richard sighed, abandoning these thoughts as idle.

After all, there was no young man seeking his counsel. In the nature of things, as long as he remained successful, there never would be.

"Richard? Don't you want to look at it? Just to be sure before they install it and lay the cement?"

He realized that Marion had again been talking for some time, unnoticed. It irritated and vaguely frightened him that he was not observing his own precept to pay careful attention.

"Of course, dear." He groped, but expertly. "Why, aren't you satisfied?"

"Oh, I suppose the furnace people ought to know the best place for it. They must install hundreds of auxiliary fuel tanks. But if you'd just look, to make sure. Maybe you'll think it ought to be somewhere else."

He remembered now. It was a domestic trifle, an improvement in the heating system. He nodded, glanced at his wristwatch and stood up.

"I'll do it right now. Then I'm afraid I've got to be going."

"Do you have a lot of calls to make today, Richard?"

"Lots," he said, cheerfully, and proceeded to overwhelm wife number three with a torrent of details. "Elite, Paragon, Acme, three or four Eat-Rites, two Welcome Inns. That's just between here and Trenton. I hope I'll reach there by evening. But with the list of restaurants I've got to see—about

twenty-five to thirty a day—I'm not sure just where I'll be tonight. Or, for that matter, in the next ten or twelve days. Eleven days, to be exact," he added thoughtfully. "Now, let's see the tank."

On the way to the basement, Richard collected his hat, overcoat and suitcase. He set the suitcase down in the kitchen, then followed Marion through the door that led downward. At least, he went two-thirds of the way down the wooden steps, intending, from that barest possible display of interest, to give full approval to her arrangements.

Standing on the lower part of the stairway, he could see most of Marion's basement. This basement belonged to Marion, because all of its appointments were hers, whereas the Hartford basement had a bar, which made it both his and Lucille's. Besides the assorted laundry machines, and the door of the small partition that formed Marion's photographic dark-room —her one hobby—he saw that a slit-trench affair had been drilled through the cement floor and dug out of the dank earth beneath. Beside it stood the new tank, not yet lowered into place, and a bulky, unopened sack of some ready-mixed cement.

Richard had now seen enough to give either his approval or criticism, if any, with suggestions. He still inclined toward approval, as easier and quicker.

"It looks all right to me," he said.

Marion peered up at him, anxious and pathetically helpless. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Richard's reply was a little short. As a matter of fact, there was a hazy something he did not like at all, seeing Marion like that, innocent and greying, a little too trusting, standing beside that gaping hole.

"Quite sure. It's just where I would have—" He broke off, acutely disturbed by the phrase he seemed to be using, and without knowing why. He changed it to, "It couldn't be better if I'd chosen the place, myself."

He turned quickly and went back up the stairs, with Marion following. Somebody, Richard darkly felt, was being in rather poor taste. But who? That mound of loose dirt, and the bag of cement besides. There was something about the scene that was not only vulgar, but oppressive.

He had placed his suitcase down beside the kitchen's outside door when Marion reappeared. She smiled brightly, but his spirits did not lift. Unaccountably, he had another obscure association of ideas. For some reason—for no logical reason—his mind turned to a certain crude, lurid, seamier side that less successful members of his calling undeniably used, to the shadowy half-world of Lonely Hearts clubs, matrimonial bu-

reas, and throbbing exchanges. Let there be a particularly messy explosion in the realm of matrimony, and the odds were even that one of those Lonely Heart clubmen, or clubwomen, was in back of it.

Richard held such strong views against agencies of this type that he couldn't abide mention of them, not even in jocular vein. It was one of few subjects upon which he had, at one time or another, quarreled with several of his wives. With all of them, in fact. About divorce, too, he was quite strict. It could easily undermine his career.

"Have you got your sample case, Richard?" Marion asked.

"It's in the trunk of the car," he told her. "I've got everything. You don't need to come out."

"Well . . . ?"

"This is the fifth," he reminded her. "I'll be back for dinner on the evening of the sixteenth. Meanwhile, I'll phone you from time to time and, if anything comes up, you can reach me through the New York answering service."

"All right, Richard. Have a good trip."

"Thank you, dear. Take care of yourself and, above all, don't worry that beautiful head of yours about trifles. Just relax. Let me do all the worrying."

They kissed, warmly. Then he picked up his suitcase and went

down the driveway to the garage. It was a fact, he reflected, that all the worrying *was* left to him. Marion probably did not appreciate just how much worry there was.

Neither did Bernice, nor Lucille, nor Helen—none of them. But, under the circumstances, he couldn't ask, he couldn't even hint, at the credit he really deserved for the many detailed responsibilities he bore.

However, these added cares were not too heavy—they were hazards of his career. Backing his coupé down the driveway, Richard's moodiness was already gone. In front of the house, he looked up and waved to Marion, now standing in the open doorway, her striking figure undimmed by a simple house-dress. She waved affectionately in return.

His was a full, engrossing life, he decided as he drove along. Some people might even think it fascinating, if not too much so, imagining it filled with dreadful risks. There *was* a small element of danger, of course. But this only added zest. It offered the faint, tang-laden pinch of adventure, without which, really, his regulated life would be unbearably placid. It was long since far too-well rehearsed.

II

THREE HOURS later, shortly before noon, Richard C. Brown

passed temporarily out of existence.

The loss of identity required less than a minute. It took place in a busy railroad checkroom in Philadelphia. It required only the time to check in his salesman's sample-case and order-book—Speedie Sandwich Co., Automatic Cutters, Precision Knives. Then, all that was needed was to take out a similar sample-case and order-book for his next incarnation, as a salesman of cosmetic novelties.

He had entered the checkroom in the name of Richard C. Brown. Under that name, he had actually made three lackadaisical stops at three widely separated restaurants that morning. At one of them, he had actually been forced to make a sale, as his order-book showed.

When he came out of the checkroom, he was Robert D. Brown. In that identity, he would make two or three torpid calls at drugstores during the afternoon, plus a few more during the next three days. That was part of the schedule—the most tiresome part, of course. It was a waste of time. But it was time indispensably given up, he felt, to protect his best interests in so many rôles.

The business concerns for which he sold—or, at any rate, with whose products he traveled—were small and specialized. No high-pressure salesmen competed for

their exclusive territorial rights. The owners of these companies might wonder what type of paralysis afflicted the slow-motion Brown, but, from their standpoint, paying him only on a commission basis, even a few sales were better than none.

As for Mr. Brown, he had other fish to fry. Far more important matters demanded his time and intelligence.

As always, when he made the change from one identity to another, he paused before the first mirror that caught his eye. The hesitation was brief, hardly more than a flicker—it was as though he half-expected to find revealed, literally, a new and totally different man. It was as if he expected so see features even more forceful and magnetic, if that were possible, than they had been before.

This time, the mirror was a rectangle in a vending machine. Robert was a little disappointed that the reflection showed no marked change. His face, in spite of its forcefulness, was smooth, oval, a little asymmetrical, just as Richard's had been. The magnetic eyes that peered back at him from beneath wisps of sandy eyebrows were still pale-blue and grey, much like those of an alert rooster. Even the hair—he removed his hat to make sure—was a downy pink, and still scarce.

Robert D. looked like Richard C. He also looked like Raymond

A. Brown of Hartford, and Reynold B. Brown of Boston. In any identity, for that matter, he knew that he resembled a great many men people find it hard to remember.

Then what made him so irresistible to women?

Robert shrugged, puzzled but complacent, and moved away. Probably, he decided, when he stared hard at himself in the mirror, his inner personality simply went into aloof, sensitive retirement.

It was convenient, of course, that his appearance was not too remarkable. It was much, much safer, to be inconspicuous. He looked like any respectable, married, thirty-nine-year-old businessman, hard-working and moderately successful—and why shouldn't he? The description was true.

There was only one detail in this picture of himself that did not quite satisfy him. His success, in a highly speculative investment field, was far too moderate. At least, it had been thus far, in the fifteen years since his first marriage, when Lucille's financial assets gave him the means to begin dealing on a large scale in his favorite securities.

The securities he bought were betting slips, in the horse-racing market. Brown—all four of him—did not exactly play the horses. It had long ceased to be play. He studied, he computed, he

doped according to the rules of his system, and then made shrewd investments. It was full-time employment, too. No system is so perfect it can't be improved, he often told himself, after which, he set about computing and doping some more, seeking to plug up all possible leaks, leaks that stubbornly reappeared in his formulae.

On his way to lunch, the real start of his business day, he bought every form-sheet and newspaper with information about the fluctuations that would take place that afternoon, as soon as the tracks opened. In the quiet restaurant where he dined, he was a familiar figure, with his charts, his notes, his record-books.

The waitress who set his place asked him, "Feeling lucky today, Mr. Brown? I could certainly use a long shot, myself, if you've got something sure."

Questions like this made him wince, inwardly, as hopelessly amateurish. How could anyone speak of luck, a long shot and a sure thing, all in the same breath? But he smiled amiably and tried not to sound condescending.

"Maybe. If I find something really hot, I'll let you know."

But the waitress scarcely heard him, her mind skipping ahead on a more facetious tangent. "What I wonder about customers doping the horses. Well, maybe you can. But I'd like to see you try something tough, like making book on

people. Be honest, Mr. Brown, sometimes you can't even figure your own wife."

Brown began a firm reply. "On the contrary," he said, and then just as firmly stopped.

Without even asking, or caring, *which* wife the waitress had in mind, the subject was taboo. It was a sore point, besides. He had been about to state that just the opposite was true. His wives ran true to form, he had found, and he only wished—how deeply and painfully he wished!—he could say the same for horses.

But the subject was too distressing to talk about. It would be unwise to speak with too much authority. By this time, the waitress had given him a menu, and gone.

It was a fact, though—and a sad one—that, as Raymond A. Brown, he had suffered reverses in his first two years of marriage with Lucille, and they had cost him nearly all of the \$27,000 with which she had opened their joint bank account. Joint bank accounts, like joint ownership, of property, Brown regarded surely among man's finest invention. There had been a dark period when, if Lucille had thoughtlessly written a check, it was quite possible that their marriage might actually have exploded.

Fortunately, he had grown very fond of a new and recently widowed acquaintance, a lady well

worthy of becoming his wife. This was Helen, and she had brought a comfortable \$40,000 to her joint bank account with Reynold B. Brown. The name, like the initial, was chosen as an orderly help to Brown's memory—at that time, he had had no intention of working his way through the alphabet. So, with Helen's unconscious but timely backing, he had recapitalized and refinanced all around. Naturally of course, he had devoted his own added insight toward a few final, vitally necessary improvements in the system.

These improvements had helped—but not enough.

His losses had been considerably slowed down. Investments that showed splendid results almost equalled those that failed. There was one year, indeed, when his accounts showed that he had broken practically even.

All the same, his resources were again depleted when he met Marion, and she, too, was welcomed into the firm—though not in those exact words. Her \$18,000 contribution to a joint bank account with Richard C. Brown had been modest, but timely and, for a while, it seemed as though the tide had finally turned.

But it hadn't turned enough—not quite. He met the gay, ornamental, chaotic Bernice, and there came a day—the day he learned she had recently inherited \$20,000—when he asked her, too, if she

would like to be his helpmate. This was how he became Robert D. Brown, sitting among the financial guides and investment paraphernalia spread out on the table of a quiet Philadelphia restaurant.

This was why he regretted that his success, thus far, had been so moderate. The tide had now, at last, definitely turned. But there were still precarious days, uncertain weeks, ahead.

This was why, while he concentrated on his chops and salad and coffee, he also pondered the mysteries of the alphabet. Would there ever be a Rudolf E. Brown? If so, what would the fellow's wife be like? He couldn't help wondering.

He finished lunch and, afterward, went on with his calculations, making the serious decisions of the day. When he had them, as he paid the bill and tipped the waitress, he remembered something.

"Bold Magician in the sixth at Bowie," he told her. "That's today's best."

"What?"

It was apparent she had forgotten their earlier talk, Brown merely repeated the name of the horse, smiling with professional reserve.

He had a lot to do that afternoon. Place his bets—collect on yesterday's single winner—call on three or four drugstores with those tiresome cosmetics. This last he considered a waste of time, save

for use as an alibi he hoped he would never need.

III

IT WAS seven o'clock that evening when Brown arrived at the big, solid apartment building in Newark, where he and Bernice had established residence. He did not like it, though he felt no fear, at sight of a police prowl-car, an ambulance and other official cars, drawn up before the entrance, with a knot of spectators gathered in solemn curiosity on the walk outside.

But he could not down a wave of uneasiness when he exchanged a nod with the elevator man, then received a sudden, startled glance of recognition, quickly veiled and averted. The attendants usually spoke after one of Brown's trips—and his suitcase showed he was just returning from one. Now they ascended in silence to the fourth floor.

He saw why, when he stepped out. The door of his apartment was open. Beyond it, he saw men obviously in authority, men in uniforms, men in plain clothes, even one man in white. Something unscheduled had occurred, and that alone spelled danger. But this was more than unusual—it was grim. Fright followed his first consternation, then panic, then dread.

Rigidly controlling himself, he walked through the small foyer of the apartment and halted in the

middle of the living room. A uniformed police lieutenant looked at his suitcase, then at him. The lieutenant's stare was sympathetic, but, at the same time, it openly and carefully studied his face.

"Mr. Brown?" he asked.

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid. It's your wife." The lieutenant paused, letting this register. Brown gave no reaction, except to put down his suitcase, then urgently and fearfully wait to hear more. "I'm Lieutenant Storber. Your wife is dead."

Brown gave a stunned, disbelieving echo. "Bernice dead? She can't be. What happened?"

The lieutenant made indirect reply with another question. "Did your wife have any reason to commit suicide, Mr. Brown?"

"Suicide?" Brown's astonishment was a spontaneous, total denial of the idea. "That's impossible. It's silly. Why, she just bought another . . . No, it's out of the question."

"She just bought another *what*, Mr. Brown?" the lieutenant asked him gently.

Brown answered mechanically, but his features began to come apart. "Another cook-book. Would a person who did that ever think about . . . ? It was a thick one, too."

"We know. We found it in the kitchen."

Brown's knees seemed to be-

come unfastened, and the lieutenant helped him as he sagged into the nearest chair.

"I tell you, there must be a mistake," he insisted weakly. "You haven't investigated thoroughly enough. You'll have to look around some more. When did it happen? *How?*"

The lieutenant sighed, took out a notebook. An interne emerged from an adjoining room, one used as a lounge and library. Not seeing Brown, he spoke to two men in plain clothes who were giving the livingroom a cursory inspection.

"D.O.A.," said the interne. "It looks to me like a stiff dose of cyanide in a cocktail, probably a sidecar. That's up to the medical examiner's office. But I'd say she drank it quick, and death was practically instantaneous. At a guess, it must have been six or seven hours ago. Around noon."

The interne went out, and the lieutenant sighed, flipped open the note-book, found a pencil.

"That's about it, Mr. Brown," The perfunctory words were filled with commiseration. "We just got here, ourselves, following a telephone call from some woman, probably a friend or neighbor we haven't yet located, and that's what we found. Your wife in the next room, with one empty glass —hers! Out in the kitchen, where she must have mixed it, cyanide in the bottle of brandy. No sign of a visitor. Nothing disturbed, ap-

parently. She left no note, which is a little unusual. But you'd be surprised, how often they don't."

"I don't believe it," Brown protested hotly. "She didn't kill herself. She couldn't. *Never!*"

The lieutenant sighed again, and his voice was soothing. "I know how you feel. But that's the way it hits everybody, when it's close to them. Because, if you realize a person is depressed and despondent, then something is done about it, more likely than not, and it never gets as far as this. There are other times a person gets into a suicidal frame of mind and doesn't tell anybody. When that happens, naturally nobody believes it, at first."

"I'll never believe it," said Brown firmly. "You've got to look into this. This is something else. It's got to be."

"Oh, don't worry, we'll dig into it," the lieutenant assured him heartily, but without much personal conviction. "We won't drop this until we're completely satisfied. Now, where have you been this afternoon, Mr. Brown?"

Brown's surprise was genuine. "Who—me?"

"Yes, you. We'll begin with you. Where were you around twelve or one o'clock, for instance?"

"Having lunch in a restaurant in Philadelphia," said Brown readily. He supplied the name of the place. "I was there for almost two

hours. The waitress ought to remember me—she asked for a tip on the races, and I gave her Bold Magician. After that, I made several business calls at drugstores. My order book is in the car downstairs. It shows where I stopped."

The lieutenant was nodding, making only the briefest of notes. In spite of his shock and grief, Brown realized that the schedule to which he had adhered so rigidly was indeed paying off, in a serious emergency. He had never anticipated an emergency quite so drastic and dreadful. But now that it was upon him, the plan was there, a safeguard against the exposure of his illegal marriages, against even the possibility of suspicion in this present trouble.

Local newspapers, the next day, carried three- and four-paragraph stories on inside pages about the apparently impulsive, macabre suicide of Mrs. Robert D. Brown. There were pictures of the twenty-eight-year-old Bernice. One caption read: *Beauty Drinks Death Cocktail*. Stories mentioned Mr. Brown, who had not been at home, as a salesman traveling for Glamor-Glo Cosmetics.

Bernice had two older sisters, one of them married. These, with the brother-in-law, helped Brown with the few arrangements that had to be made. The brother-in-law confided in Brown, and Lieutenant Storber.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not surprised. Bernice was always moody and different. Most people wouldn't notice, but there were little things gave her away, to anyone who had his eyes open."

She was buried on the third day, at a quiet service. Brown came back to the apartment afterward, but there was nothing for him to do. He made arrangements to have the furniture stored and to terminate his lease. Then he packed his personal suitcase. It was the third day. He was due in Hartford that evening, at seven o'clock. Lucille would be expecting him—as Raymond A. Brown, salesman for a firm that manufactured smokers' accessories.

Brown felt better after the change-over. Lucille might have her faults, but, tactfully handled and ignoring her sudden outbursts of temper, she could also be a wonderful tonic for the nerves. Bruised and shaken as his were, after the last three days, he needed an influence that would restore his normal poise and self-confidence.

Therefore it was strange, and more than frightening, when he arrived at his modest, two-story Hartford home that evening, to find a police prowler car parked in front of it, along with others whose official look he knew too well. The newly familiar scene was only too familiar.

He felt that this was a motion

picture he had seen before. He hadn't liked it the first time, but now he was plunged, in a single moment, from uneasy disbelief to numb horror. This couldn't be happening—not again—not to him. But it *was* happening. It didn't help, for some reason it was only worse, much worse, that this time he knew all the lines by heart, including his own.

"Mr. Brown?"

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"I'm afraid I have bad news for you, Mr. Brown. It's your wife. I'm Lieutenant-detective Todd. Your wife is dead."

"Lucille? Dead? She can't be. It's impossible. It's silly. This whole thing is silly. What happened?"

"Did your wife have any reason for taking her own life, Mr. Brown?"

"Lucille kill herself? No—absolutely not. That's out of the question." Brown's repudiation, this time, came from more than spontaneous grief. There was black suspicion behind it. "There's no chance she committed suicide, Lieutenant. None!"

The lieutenant's sympathy was partly habit, but he showed a trace of real curiosity, as well. "Why do you say that, Mr. Brown? How can you be so sure?"

Brown opened his mouth to tell him why. It could not be coincidence that two of his wives, unknown to each other, had died

by their own hands within a matter of days. But he checked himself in time. The mere existence of his surplus marriages, if exposed, spelled ruin.

"It wouldn't be like her," he said lamely. Then he collected his shattered wits and marshalled the solid facts of his alibi.

They were good enough for Lieutenant-detective Todd. The widower had been having lunch in a quiet restaurant, fifty miles away, at the hour Lucille drank a cocktail, an old-fashioned this time, loaded with cyanide. She had been alone in the house, in the downstairs bar. The bottle of liquor used in the drink also held cyanide.

An old, dusty tin of the substance had been found among the hand-wrought bracelets, brooches and costume novelties in which Lucille dabbled, as a hobby. Again, there was no note. But Lieutenant Todd told Brown that this happened more often than most people thought.

Three days later, the same iron-clad story satisfied Detective-inspector Casey of the Boston police, who was inquiring into the bizarre suicide of Mrs. Reynold B. Brown, housewife, of that city. Though hard-boiled, Casey and his fellow-officers were deeply touched by the protests of the bereaved husband that Helen couldn't, wouldn't and didn't knowingly drink that deadly old-

fashioned. Again! Their investigation would be thorough, but did Brown have any cold facts to support his refusal to accept suicide as the obvious conclusion? Anything at all except his intuition?

Brown did, indeed, have one overwhelming fact, but he was not in any position to offer it. Some unknown party or parties had a profound grudge against him and his wives, and was methodically carrying it to the extreme limit. But who? Of more immediate importance, who would be next?

The answer to the last question was simplicity itself. When they buried Helen, and Brown tried to pull his tangled thoughts together, he was at least able to perform a problem in elementary arithmetic—subtractions, unfortunately. By ruthless annulment—he hated to call it murder, in an affair so personal—he had only one wife left, Marion, in Camden.

As to the method used in breaking up his happy homes, Brown had little doubt. Some inconspicuous person, a casual friend, even a complete stranger with some plausible tale, had in each case called upon the victim when she was alone. At some point, the hostess would suggest cocktails, and, when she had poured them, her attention must have been diverted long enough, or, perhaps, she had been decoyed from the room, while the fatal drink was prepared.

After that, it was easy. Thoroughly wash, then replace the second cocktail glass. Put some more cyanide in the already open bottle, then unobtrusively depart. To the police, each case was no mystery, because it stood alone. Only Brown knew there were three, that they were linked and what the link was. Only Brown and—a murderer.

But who had such a fanatical resentment against Brown, the happy home-builder, and his uncomplaining wives? It occurred to him that he might somehow have come to the notice of an avenging misogynist. Some crank who hated not only women but marriage, especially wholesale marriage. That, he thought, might well be it. Brown, personally, had few close friends. He had, as far as he knew, no enemies.

After Boston, his regular schedule called for a restful, relaxing two-day trip back to Camden and now, in spite of serious misgivings, he set out for the city on the Delaware. He was worried about Marion, among a lot of other problems. He had forgotten to phone her, immersed as he was in so many tragic details. He wondered if he should call her now, with a peremptory warning not to drink any cocktails with anybody, no matter who?

He decided against it. For one thing, Marion never drank cocktails. He had never known her to

drink anything alcoholic, not even beer, and she ought to be invulnerable to the only technique the killer seemed to know.

For another thing, if he did phone, any strange injunctions of that sort would be awfully, awfully hard to explain.

IV

AT SEVEN o'clock on the evening of the sixteenth, the day and the hour he was expected, Brown rolled to a stop at the curb before his house in Camden. It was with relief that he found room to do so. The street was curiously empty of police and other too-familiar official vehicles. Marion met and greeted him at the front door, just as he reached it.

"Richard, darling!" she said, with warmth.

Even as they kissed, he spoke without thinking, from habit. "Yes. What's the matter?"

"Nothing—why should there be? Did you have a nice trip?"

Brown recollected himself almost with a start. He shook his head and, at the same time, nodded, achieving a circular motion that might mean a lot, but was intended to signify nothing. He went on into the living room and, for a moment, stood in the middle of it, looking around. It, too, seemed rather empty, unpopulated as it was by hard-eyed but sympathetic detectives.

Could it be, that the nightmare

was over? He wondered. Though the riddle might never be solved—and Brown realized all too well that an official solution would be most inconvenient—the devastation, at least, might have ended. A simple armistice, in fact, with no more casualties, might be the best, the most congenial, finish possible, all around.

Brown's eyes were caught by an array of pamphlets, magazines, circulars, brochures, he had never seen before, certainly not on the table of his own living room. But their titles told him with ghastly clarity what they were—*Harmo-nious Hearts*, *Why Wait for a Mate?*, *Cupid's Catalogue*, *The Widow's Guide*. Literature from a host of Lonely Hearts Clubs, that blight of amateurism upon a lofty profession. What were they doing here? Who put them there, in the first place?

He took a deep breath to bel-low an enraged question, but changed his mind. He looked at Marion, who smiled brightly in return, as composed as ever. Tonight, however, she seemed even more composed. Suddenly, Richard did not want to hear the answer to his unspoken question. At least, he did not want to hear the right answer, and he was almost certain this was the answer she would give.

Let the little woman have her secret foibles, Brown decided. Silence was truly golden.

"Are you tired, Richard?" she asked. "Shall I mix us some cocktails?"

Us? Brown sagged into the nearest chair, missing the firm, encouraging support of Lieutenant Something-or-other, in Newark. But he managed a nod, even ventured a cautious query.

"Thanks, honey. Only I thought you don't drink?"

Marion's reply was forthright and cheery. "Oh, I do now. It came over me, maybe I've been missing something. So I forced myself to experiment with a cocktail here and there, just now and then, these last few days. And I found I enjoyed them. A little drink never hurt anyone, at least, not me. What would you like, an old-fashioned? A side-car?"

Brown was not aware that he had any preference, but Marion had already moved to perform the mixing. While the sound of ice-cubes, glasses and a serving tray clattered pleasantly from the kitchen, he thought hard about some of the phrases she had used. They were poorly chosen, no doubt about it.

Unless, of course, they were well-chosen, and intended to be. Had she meant, actually meant, a certain nerve-wracking interpretation that could be placed upon her words? An old-fashioned—or a side-car. These suggestions all too closely resembled bull's-eyes.

He looked at the table, again read a couple of obscene titles. *The Widow's Guide*. What widow? *Why Wait for a Mate?* This had a horribly impatient ring.

Brown remembered something suddenly and stood up. Marion emerged from the kitchen, bearing the tray with glasses and shaker as he entered it, like a sleep-walker, and crossed to the basement door. He went down the wooden steps, and looked.

Sure enough, the hole for the fuel tank was still there, unfilled. So was the bag of cement. But the new tank was gone. There was the door to Marion's small but well-stocked darkroom. Didn't photographers often use certain potent chemicals?

From upstairs, through the floor of the living room, he heard the muffled, steady rattle of ice in a shaker. After a full minute of thought, he turned around and went back up.

The drinks were poured and waiting, and the scene, to the eye alone, was a study in domestic peace. Marion sat in the center of the lounge, before a low stand holding their drinks. Opposite her was the large chair he favored, when at home in Camden.

"I made old-fashions" said Marion, superfluously. "Try yours, Richard. Tell me if it's just right."

Just right for what? Still stand-

ing, Richard glanced once at the glass placed next to his chair, then at his packed suitcase, resting where he had left it beside the door.

"Tell me all about your trip," Marion coaxed. "Don't look so upset. After all, nothing terrible happened, did it? To *you* I mean?"

The question sounded both leading, and commanding. He answered it. "No."

"Then *do* sit down and stop worrying. You look positively haunted, like some fugitive from justice. As if the police might link you with a lot of old crimes, any minute, and then they'd be looking for you everywhere, year after year, no matter where you went, or how you were disguised. Relax, Richard. Sit down."

He sat down, but he didn't relax. The horrible picture she had painted was—or could be—far too logical.

"It's that job of yours," Marion declared, maternally. "Travelling, I mean. The Speedie Sandwich Company asks too much, expecting you to cover such a wide territory. I think you ought to tell them that, hereafter, you'll confine yourself to just this area—our area. Don't *you* think you should—Richard?"

Richard guessed, from the tone of her voice, that a nod was expected. He delivered it. But what

he was actually thinking about was the tap of a cop's hand on his shoulder, in Florida maybe, or even Alaska, arresting Raymond-Reynold-Robert Brown for the murder of three wives.

"And I'll keep all your books and accounts for you," Marion informed him, with relentless kindness. "Those petty details can be a burden. Hereafter, you can let *me* do all the worrying about them."

For a moment, Brown wondered whom she was quoting, but then he envisioned the vast scope of her cooperation and the disaster it spelled. He would not only have to sell those confounded gadgets, but close scrutiny of his accounts would disclose, and foredoom, any further operations of the whole Brown speculative system.

Now she was off on some other subject altogether. It was strange, Marion never used to be much of a talker.

". . . . so that's what I told the men from the company. They should take back the fuel tank until you finally decided, and, in the meantime, leave things the way they are. Have you tasted your drink, Richard? Come on, try it." She lifted her own glass, and exclaimed, with spirit, "Bottoms up."

Did he really have that dismal choice, between hopeless flight and his own basement?

"No thanks," he said, desperately, making the choice.

"Oh, don't be silly! Here, try a sip of mine." She leaned forward, as though to proffer a taste, and the next moment he found she had pressed her glass into his hand. "You keep it. I'll take yours."

It was a most understanding gesture, a most reassuring gesture—temporarily. Marion drank with zest. Richard took a sip.

Nothing happened to either of them.

Minutes later, Marion was demanding his attention again.

". . . so, if you decide differently, Richard, any time you want, you can change your mind," said Marion.

"Decide?"

"About that hole downstairs."

"Oh, yes."

"Whatever you want. It's up to you."

NEXT MONTH . . .

MICHAEL SHAYNE PRESENTS

THE BODY WENT TO BED

by BRETT HALLIDAY

ONE MOMENT AFTER MURDER

by OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

LATE DATE WITH DEATH

by FLETCHER FLORA

GUEST FOR BREAKFAST

by C. B. GILFORD

THE RITES OF DEATH

by HAL ELLSON

KILL IF YOU HAVE TO

by WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

A Hitch-hiker Brushes Murder in a Short Story by

JOHN E. HASTY

Desire for vengeance is a sickness—all the psychiatrists agree on this. But so is doing time for the crime of a so-called friend. Gladden burned to wipe out the wrong with a bullet, for his soul refused to file it as—

Unfinished Business

THE CLOSER to Los Angeles, the tougher it was to hitch a ride. Everybody seemed to be in a hell of a hurry. Since the Navy truck dropped him near Oxnard, Gladden figured he must have walked eight or ten miles—the largest continuous stretch since he'd left San Francisco at four o'clock that morning.

It was now two in the afternoon, with the fury of the sun pouring down on him, and the pavement scorching the soles of his shoes. He felt hot and tired, but curiously he was not hungry, although he hadn't eaten since he'd started. It was a good thing, though, not being hungry. He was going to have to go easy on meals. He'd need most of what little money he had for return bus fare. The idea was to get back fast—kill Mac, then get back fast.

With luck, he'd be in San Francisco by tomorrow, the day after at the latest. Then he'd buy a half pint of cheap whiskey. With the smell of it on his breath

and on his clothes, he'd come stumbling into the crumby little skid row hotel where he lived, stinking, dirty, unshaven, looking like any other bum who'd been on a binge.

He'd hit the sack, and pretend to sleep it off, and wouldn't remember anything beyond drinking with a couple of winos on Howard Street. Not that anyone would question him. Who'd bother? At the end of the week, he'd report to the parole officer as usual.

The green Chevvie that picked him up south of Oxnard took him all the way to Hollywood. He uncramped himself from the seat, got out, thanked the guy, and stood there in a hot glare of late afternoon sunshine, watching the departing Chevvie lose itself in the flow of traffic. Automatically, his mind began working on the problem of how to find Mac.

In almost any other city—in New York or Chicago or Detroit—you begin trying to locate a

man by looking in the phone book. But in Hollywood, people in show business considered it strategic to have unlisted numbers. An unlisted number made you appear important, big time. As long as Gladden had known Mac, the telephone directory had never listed Lyle MacComber.

Mac's last address known to Gladden was the Sereno Apartments, near La Cienega Boulevard. It would do as a starting point. Mac had moved there from the little shack they had occupied together, because he had hooked up with a combo playing in a La Cienega nite spot, and said he wanted to be closer to the job.

"With me out every night," he had told Gladden, "and snoring in all keys during the day, while you're trying to paint in the next room—well, it just won't work out. We'll keep in touch, though. And here—here's a couple of twenties, enough for another month's rent. Pay it back when you land a job with Walt Disney. Otherwise, forget it."

Mac had been kidding about the job with Disney. But a funny thing—two days later, the Disney studio had phoned Gladden and had expressed interest in the sketches he had submitted. They had wanted to talk to him on the following morning. Gladden hadn't kept the appointment. That evening, the cops had come in, searched him and the shack.

They had found a bottle of liquor from a store that had been robbed, along with the twenty-dollar bills. One of the bills had had a mark on it, a blob of purple ink. The old man who owned the liquor store had remembered it. So had the bank teller who had given it to him, not many hours before the stickup.

When the police had questioned Mac, he had denied everything. If they had found a bottle of liquor, it belonged to Gladden. Mac had removed all his belongings when he moved. He had moved, because he couldn't get along with Gladden. Gladden? An oddball, a character who just wasn't right.

Mac had laughed about the twenty-dollar bills. Did that make sense? Going around giving away twenties? Besides, at the time of the stickup, he had been in another part of town, working out an arrangement with the piano player of the combo. The piano player confirmed it.

Although the store owner, under cross-examination, admitted having been knocked over the head before getting a good look at the stickup man, he had clung tenaciously to his identification of Gladden as the assailant. He couldn't describe the man in detail, but he could describe him closely enough. And the description did fit Gladden. So did the bottle of liquor and the bill

with the purple blob on it. The jury had taken less than two hours to return a verdict of guilty.

At times, these events possessed for Gladden a faded, nebulous quality, as if they were part of a vaguely remembered dream, or a moving picture seen long ago. The only reality had been the reality of prison. His return to Hollywood brought fuzzy memories back into sharp focus, so vividly clear that they dimmed the actuality surrounding him. People passing him on the sidewalk, cars moving, now swiftly, now slowly, along the street, were without substance and meaning. He turned and walked in the direction of La Cienega Boulevard, thinking of the morning he had first met Mac.

Hollywood had been a new and exciting adventure then. On his way to deliver some art work to an advertising agency on the Sunset Strip, Gladden had stopped at Schwab's Drug Store for coffee. The counter was crowded with late breakfasters, as Gladden slid into the one vacant seat, alongside a big, broad-shouldered, blond character who wore sports clothes and a scarf knotted around his throat. He looked like a movie actor or, according to Gladden's conception, a director. Over coffee, they had exchanged a dozen or so words. Then Gladden had left.

Their second meeting had also

been at Schwab's. It was dinner time — early — about five-thirty. When Gladden came in, Mac had been sitting alone at the end of the counter, a copy of *Variety* propped up in front of him against a sugar shaker. He had glanced up and said, "Hi! How's the art racket?"

Gladden had looked puzzled, and Mac had laughed. "I noticed those cartoons you had with you the other morning," was his explanation. "They were real George. Yours, or are you agenting for somebody?"

"Mine," Gladden had said, "and I wish some of these ad agencies thought as well of them."

"Hell, whatta you wasting your time on those chiseling fifteen per-centers for? You oughta be with one of the big studios, doing animations. You got a touch."

"That's what I keep telling myself, but so far I haven't even got inside a studio gate," Gladden had replied.

This time they had talked all through a leisurely dinner. Gladden learned that his new friend was neither an actor nor a director, but played trumpet with a band on a television show. His name was Lyle MacComber, and he knew his way around Hollywood. With easy familiarity, he had dropped places and names, some of the latter so important that even Gladden recognized them.

"You know Al Corvak over at Paramount?"

"The art director? I've heard of him."

"Al's an old buddy of mine. During the war, we were in Special Services together. A prince. Say, what about me setting up a lunch date so you can meet him? It won't do you a bit of harm. How about next Thursday?"

"That'll be fine with me." Gladden had tried to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"Okay, I'll call Al and arrange it, and then phone you. What's your number?"

"Sunset 2-6421."

MacComber had scribbled it on the margin of his copy of *Variety* and said, "Great! I'll get in touch with Al tomorrow."

When they left Schwab's Gladden had picked up MacComber's dinner check.

He had heard nothing from MacComber for almost three weeks. Then, late one night, the phone rang, and the voice over it had sounded familiar.

"Johnny?"

"Yes."

"This is Mac."

"Who?"

"Ol' Massa MacComber. Lyle MacComber. Ah been havin' me a whole hatfulla trouble, son. Damned Yankees done run me off the plantation." He had made Gladden laugh, as he was always able to do. "No foolin', Johnny,

I'm in a spot. Had a hassel with my landlady, and she gave me the heave-ho. Think you could put me up for tonight? Wanta see you anyway. Just had a talk with Al Corvak—he's been out of town, but he's back now—we'll get together with him and rig that date."

After Mac arrived, they had talked until almost daylight, mostly about Gladden's prospects. If nothing came of the get-together with Al Corvak, well, Mac had other connections. Solid, too—real solid. Before they went to bed, plans were made for Mac to move in with Gladden and share the rent.

He seldom did—nor did any of his connections pay off. Yet, somehow, Gladden hadn't resented this. Mac was always a lot of fun. Gladden liked him. A long time had passed before Gladden got Mac really pegged. A long time—and three years of that time Gladden had spent in prison.

Three years—thirty-six months! A thousand and ninety-five days of steel and concrete and antiseptic odors. Grueling work in the jute mill, which had ruined his hands so that he might never be able to paint again. As he walked the palm-fringed sidewalk, he thrust his hands in front of him, opened and closed his fingers, now too stiff to manipulate a brush. But not too stiff to take care of Mac . . .

In his imagination, Gladden had lived that scene again and again. He'd be waiting for Mac in the darkness of Mac's apartment, perhaps in the shadows of the empty street outside the home of Mac's newest girl friend, perhaps in the dim, deserted parking lot where, after a late show, Mac would come for his car.

When Mac appeared, Gladden would say softly—oh, so softly, "Hello, Mac. Remember me? Johnny Gladden?" He'd let Mac experience one agonizing, fear-congealed moment. Then he'd press the muzzle of the little gun into Mac's belly, and squeeze the trigger. The little gun that hardly made any noise . . .

He walked on.

The Sereno—actually El Sereno—was not an apartment house but a motel—two rows of bungalows, each with a garage, set in a U shape around a central concrete area. Sere and dusty-looking palms flanked the driveway leading into the area on which several cars were parked. The first bungalow to the right bore a sign reading *Office*. Gladden decided he must play this cautiously, make his inquiries about MacComber seem casual. He went on in.

An elderly, undersized man, wearing khaki trousers and a sparkling clean white shirt, moved aimlessly behind the desk. He had watery blue eyes and a melan-

choly mustache. He was listening to a small radio with the volume full up. He turned it down a trifle before he said, "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"What are your rates here, Pop?"

"Single?"

"That's right."

"Six dollars a day."

"Oh-oh! That's too rich for me. I figured it might be, just from the looks of the place. A friend of mine recommended it. Guy named MacComber. He still around, or has he moved someplace else?"

"If you mean Lyle MacComber, he's moved to Las Vegas."

"Las Vegas?" The words came explosively.

"I think he said Las Vegas. Might have been Reno, though. Anyhow, Nevada. Landed a big job up there. Been gone for more'n a year now."

For a moment, Gladden had the insane urge to laugh. So this was the end of it! All his plans were dissolved into nothing. The long hitch-hike had been useless. Mac wasn't in Hollywood.

Suddenly, the total fatigue of all the miles that stretched between Hollywood and San Francisco blanketed upon Gladden. He felt as if something inside him had collapsed and with it, his strength. He discovered that his hands were clutching the edge of the desk, that the old man was looking at him curiously.

"Say, you're all right, ain't you? Not sick or something?" he asked with concern.

Gladden pushed his hat back from his forehead and let himself lean against the desk. What difference now what the old man thought about him? What reason to be cautious? He didn't reply until the old man repeated, "You all right?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm tired, that's all. I hitch-hiked four hundred miles today to find a guy."

"MacComber? You know, I sorta figured you was pretty disappointed. When I told you MacComber wasn't around, you turned white as a sheet. What'd he do—owe you money?"

Gladden let the question go unanswered. In a moment the old man went on with, "Say, if you're busted—look, I just work here, and I'd catch hell if the manager ever found out—but a couple fellas checked out of Bungalow D about twenty minutes ago, and it won't be made up till the night gal comes on at eight o'clock. If you wanna lay down in there and rest for a spell, go ahead. There's a shower, too."

The word made a picture in Gladden's mind. A cold, brisk shower, pelting against his body, washing away the heat and the weariness. He said, "Thanks, Pop. That would be swell. Thanks a lot!"

"That's okay. Maybe someday

somebody'll do a favor for me. You look real done up."

He walked Gladden to the diminutive porch and pointed out the bungalow. "That's D—the one with the door open. Don't worry if you drop off to sleep. I'll be around a little before eight o'clock and wake you up."

Bungalow D consisted of a single room and bath. The twin beds were unmade, the pillows rumpled, the bedding tossed back and dragging on the floor. There were two chairs, a bureau, a small table marked with cigarette burns, rings left by damp tumblers. Gladden went into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He removed his coat, tie and shirt, closed the lid of the john, and sat on it to take off his shoes.

The effort seemed more than he could manage, and he had to pause and rest. He had never imagined he could be so tired. From outside, drifted the sound of a car, the soft throb of a motor, rhythmic, drowsy, blending into a reverie in which he saw a long stretch of pavement, flooded with sunshine and extending on and on between brown, heat-scented hills. Then both sound and image faded.

He was awakened sharply by the opening and closing of the outside door, the slam followed by voices, male voices engaged in a desultory argument.

"It's gotta be in here."

"Why didn't you think about it before we checked out?"

The two men, apparently, were the former occupants of the bungalow. Gladden sat very still, wondering, half fearfully, what he'd say if they should discover him and what would happen to the old man.

The voices went on. "A lousy cigarette lighter."

"It cost me forty bucks. And it's got my name engraved on it. Supposin' somebody finds it and hooks me up with MacComber?"

"How's anybody gonna hook you up with MacComber? Who knows we come here to get him?"

"That old guy in the office knows. You asked him about MacComber, didn't you?"

"I didn't ask nobody about nothin'. I found out MacComber ain't here, and I found out where he is. Or anyhow, where he'll be tonight at nine o'clock. Now stop yattin', and look for your lighter."

The sound of a dresser drawer being pulled out, then, "All the way to California to rub out a guy. We coulda rubbed him out in Nevada."

"Don't be a schmo. You know the setup in Nevada—no killings since Buggsy. If the jerk had only stayed there, he coulda laughed about not payin' his gamblin' debts, but now—*cripes!* Look! There's your lighter, on the floor by the bed."

Silence. After that, the opening

and closing of the outside door, then the fluttering explosions of a car starting.

Blood pounded beneath Gladden's temples as the meaning of what he had heard seeped through him. Mac had come back to Hollywood. He was back, and these two men had been sent to rub him out.

Gladden's initial reactions were instinctive. He began dressing rapidly, filled with a wild, unreasoned urge to do something. What? Perhaps issue a warning—tell the old man in the office—do something.

He was fully dressed, standing outside the bathroom, before he realized he was thinking crazy. The old man would call the police. There'd be questions—questions only Gladden could answer—first, about the two men, then about himself. Who he was, where he was from, what he was doing here. They'd check his replies, find out he was violating his parole by leaving San Francisco. He'd be sent back to prison.

The two men were taking care of Mac. That wasn't the way Gladden wanted it, but that's the way it was. That's the way it had to be now, with him keeping strictly clear of it. He opened the door and looked out. The old man had his radio up to full volume again. The concrete area was deserted. Gladden moved across it to the sidewalk. As he reached it,

he heard—or thought he heard—the old man call out to him. He did not look back—just quickened his pace and walked on.

He began to get panicky and his mind shouted conflicting orders. Running away like this was an even worse mistake. When the old man read in the papers about the MacComber killing, he'd remember Gladden, he'd remember this incident. He'd notify the police.

"Young fella—tall—dark hair. He was here last evening around seven o'clock, looking for MacComber. Acted sorta nervous and peculiar. No, he didn't give me his name or say where he was from. Hey, wait a second! He did say he'd come four hundred miles to find MacComber. So wherever he's from, it's four hundred miles from here."

Then the teletypes would start clicking, and the bulletins would go out. Eventually, they'd pick him up for questioning. Name, Johnny Gladden. Criminal record, assault and robbery. Violating parole. Identified as the man looking for MacComber at the latter's former residence, only a few hours before nine o'clock, the night of the murder.

He was walking rapidly, his thoughts churning. *Take it easy. Slow down. Try to concentrate. Try to think this thing out.* The two men—if, somehow, they could be stopped. He could phone the police from a pay station—

give a fake name, tell them about the two men. Tell them *what?* A fantastic story involving two guys you hadn't seen, couldn't describe.

The police would think him a crackpot. Even if they believed him, they'd want to know where he overheard these men. When he answered that question, there'd be a squad car on its way to the motel, cops all over the place, listening to the old man's story.

All right, then, what about an alibi. He could arrange to be someplace where people would see him. He could stay there until after nine o'clock. Better yet, he could be on the next bus headed for San Francisco. He could prove, then, that he wasn't anywhere near MacComber. Oh, great! At the same time, he'd be proving parole violation and would soon be on the return trip to prison.

The thing to do was to find Mac—find him, and warn him. He was somewhere in Los Angeles. *Somewhere!* Somewhere in a city that sprawled over an area of more than four hundred square miles.

Gladden was stepping off the curb as the traffic light went red. He drew back, waited. When the light changed, people straggled past him, but he did not move. Weariness again hung upon him like leaden weights. His mind refused to work, retreated as an animal retreats, bruised and sullen,

after vainly flinging itself against the barriers of a trap. All he could do was stand there.

Then, without apparent mental effort, it came to him. Schwab's Drug Store! Schwab's had always been Mac's hangout. He'd be certain to show up there. Somebody there would know where he could be found.

Gladden took a long, deep breath, and exhaled slowly. He was a long way from Schwab's, but he began walking in that direction. . . .

Nothing had changed. The magazine racks up in front, the glass showcases, crowded together, leaving narrow aisles that led to the phone booths in the rear. One of them occupied now by a girl. There were two waitresses behind the lunch counter. Gladden sat down, and the larger girl, wearing a white uniform that fitted her all too tightly, came toward him and flipped a menu in front of him.

Gladden shook his head. "I just dropped in to look for a friend of mine—Lyle MacComber. Has he been around recently?"

"I guess I don't know him."

"A trumpet player. He's on television. A tall, blond, good-looking guy. He hangs out here."

"If he does, I ain't specially noticed him." She called to the other waitress. "Marge, you know anybody who comes in here by the name—of . . . ?"

"MacComber," Gladden said, "Everybody calls him Mac."

"Never heard of him."

So all this had been useless, a waste of time. He thought, *I can't just sit here. I have to do something.* But all the energy seemed to have drained out of him. He remained in his seat, his shoulders hunched, his elbows resting on the counter. His gaze traveled to the reflection of a clock in the back-counter mirror. The image was backward—it had to be figured out. It was ten minutes of eight. At nine o'clock, in just seventy minutes, Mac would be dead.

Gladden went tense, his stomach tightening as if a hand had reached inside and squeezed it like a wet sponge. He'd never find Mac in time. There wasn't a chance. He slid off the stool, stood indecisively. The girl, emerging from the phone booth, set up a train of thought. In the old days, Mac had gone with a girl named Rita Logan. In spite of his lies, his two-timing, the condescending way he treated her, she was crazy about him. Rita might know where he was.

As Gladden moved to the phone booth, his legs seemed no longer to belong to his body. They threatened to give way and collapse him on the floor. He grasped the edge of the booth door, pulled himself inside. A dog-eared phone book hung there, and he began fumbling through the pages. He

found the name—*Logan, Rita*—The same old address.

He deposited a dime and dialed the number. At the other end of the line, the telephone thrummed with that peculiar intonation from which you, somehow, are aware it's ringing in a deserted house, an empty room. She wasn't at home. She wasn't there. A dozen rings brought no answer.

Then, there was a sharp click, followed by a woman's voice. "Yeah?"

For an interval, Gladden could find no reply, and the voice said sharply, "*Hello!*"

"I'm calling Miss Logan. Is she there?"

"This is Rita Logan. Who're you?" The words were slurred and halting. The woman was obviously drunk.

"I'm a friend of Lyle MacComber, from out of town. I wonder if you could tell me where he lives now, or give me his phone number."

"Watcha callin' me for? You got gall, botherin' me."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know who else to call. Mac's often mentioned you, and I thought—"

"Oh, he has, huh? Well, that don't give you no right to call me up when I'm busy. I got friends here."

"Look, I'm only asking you if you can tell me how to locate Mac."

"Sure, I can tell yuh. Sure, I

can—if I wanna. But I don't wanna. I ain't no information bureau for every bum that comes to town." She began abusing him, screaming at him, overriding him when he attempted to speak. He felt sweat trickling down his face. He hung on, he *had* to hang on. There was so little time left.

Then, abruptly, the voice ceased. All at once, there was no sound, no dial tone—nothing. Gladden kept saying, "*Hello—hello—hello!*" *Frantically!*—louder each time, until he was shouting. Finally he stopped. Still holding the phone, he slouched against the wall of the booth, and rested.

A man's voice over the instrument jerked him to wakefulness. "*Hello! Who is this? What's it all about?*"

Gladden straightened, and tried to make his own voice sound polite and respectful. "I'm sorry if I caused any trouble. I'm a friend of Lyle MacComber. I thought maybe Miss Logan could tell me how to get in touch with him."

"MacComber's band is playing at the Rancho on the Sunset Strip. Now lay off, will ya?"

Gladden hung up. The Sunset Strip began just outside of Schwab's. The Rancho could be only blocks away. He left the booth and walked out of the drug store into the soft inflowing dusk.

On the plaster facade of the building had been painted in

script the words, THE RANCHO. Underneath, in smaller letters, *Mac MacComber and His Vegas Vagabonds*. Gladden opened the synthetically weathered door, went inside, stopped. The front area was a bar. There was not much of a crowd. A young couple sat at one of the small tables. A group of three men stood at the bar in muted conversation with the barman. A brick wall with an archway separated the bar from the restaurant beyond. On the restaurant side of the wall, someone was noodling softly on a piano. A big man with black lacquer hair, wearing a sloppy Tuxedo, appeared from somewhere.

"Yes, sir." His voice was smooth and oily. "Table for one?"

"No table," Gladden said, "I want to see one of the guys in the band."

"Oh? Well, we haven't a band."

"I mean the Vegas Vagabonds."

"They closed here last Sunday. So you'll probably have to go all the way to Las Vegas."

"There's somebody playing back there."

The big man smiled sarcastically. "That happens to be a piano." He put a hand on Gladden's shoulder. "No band—that's all, chum."

Gladden drew away. "If you don't mind, I'll take a look."

The big man grasped him by

the shoulder again, spun him around. "I said *that's all!*"

Something quite apart from Gladden took over. It was as if he were standing aside, watching himself, watching his back and shoulders stiffen, the fingers of his right hand tighten together. This was not happening to Johnny Gladden, but to someone else. Then he felt pain across his knuckles. The big man reeled backward, crashing against one of the tables.

The young couple, sitting nearby, stood up swiftly. The girl made a little sound in her throat. One of the men from the bar strode across the room. He held a police badge cupped in his palm. He took Gladden's arm and said, "All right, tough guy, I guess you and me'll take a ride to the jail house."

Gladden knew now that, from the start, all this had been foreordained. He saw, with startling clarity, that he had never really had a chance. He had been moving, not of his own free will but according to the subtle design of malevolent fate, fate that had permitted Mac to beat him again. Mac was safe in Nevada—Johnny Gladden was on his way back to prison.

The cop was walking him out through the doorway onto the sidewalk. At the curb was parked a bright red Jaguar. A man was climbing out of it—and the man

was Mac. Mac was heavier than Gladden's recollection of him, his complexion more florid, yet he was still dashingly handsome in his dark brown slacks and shaggy, cream-colored sports coat.

Gladden's throat tightened for an instant so he could not call out. When the call did come, it was lost in the blast of gunfire and the roar of a black coupé that sped westward along Sunset.

MacComber drew himself up straight. He stood quite still for a moment before his legs gave way, and he sank to his knees, gripping his belly. Then he toppled over sideways and lay on the sidewalk, the tiny pink bubbles breaking between his lips.

Almost instantly, a crowd

gathered, forming a tight, dense circle around Mac and the cop, who was attempting to take charge. People pushed and shoved to get a better view, talking excitedly, telling the cop and each other how they had seen the black coupé, and the two men in it, had heard the shots fired. A prowler car swung up and stopped, and two more policemen leaped out.

Gladden moved away from the scene, walking slowly until he turned off onto a side street, then more briskly. In spite of his fatigue, he felt elation and new confidence. The fatigue would pass—and so would his parole period. He knew now that, someday, he would be back in Hollywood, that he'd be working for Disney after all.



LOUIS TRIMBLE

Jake Parker had an accurate throwing arm, though not as accurate as Farmer Teel—which was probably a good thing, since Teel's carnival throws caused his murder. But then, neither of them knew that he was making—

A Pitch for Murder

I DIDN'T LIKE the assignment. Not just because it was strictly a cheap job, but because it could backfire. I can think of little worse for a private detective, just starting out in business, than running afoul of the local cops.

However, it wasn't a matter of choice, so here I was strolling between the sideshows and the "games" as the carnival called them. I had twenty bucks in my pocket. It represented my advance for the job. It represented, also, every dime I owned.

The head office in Seattle had hired me as branch representative east of the mountains. They paid the office rent and gave me a cut on any case they assigned me. But that was as far as it went—the rest was strictly up to me.

So far, the rest wasn't much. The agency had a good enough reputation, but I was an unknown as far as the local cops were concerned. The city boys weren't so bad, but Grimsby, the sheriff, didn't like private detectives—in-

cluding one Jake Parker—myself.

Besides my difficulty with Grimsby, I was becoming financially embarrassed. I had started on a very threadbare shoestring. It had reached a point where I was tying knots in it to keep eating when the carnival hit town. Much as I disliked the job that Jim Nichols, the owner, offered, I had to take it or quit the business. So I took it.

The locus of my assignment was a "game" booth, but I was under orders to be inconspicuous, so I eased my way up there via the sideshows. Being inconspicuous was a little difficult for me. Sixty-five inches, two hundred and ten pounds and a face marked by twelve years of pro football are not easy to hide.

Like any other yokel, I stopped to gawk at the half-man, half-woman show, then drifted away. In succession, I studied the bearded lady, the genuine Hawaiian dancer and the human skeleton. By then, I was at the

end of the row. I began to work my way back up the other side where the game booths were located.

There was quite a crowd gathered before one booth. It was very, very hot under the steaming sun, and the smell of roasting peanuts and sawdust mingled with a strong attar of sweating farmers. The cracked skull that had finally put me out of football was beginning to object to all this. I made things a little easier by pushing to the front of the crowd. Here I was out of the sun, under an awning.

The reason for the crowd became quickly apparent. A long, lanky farmer was being urged by his friends to pitch baseballs at pyramids of wooden milk bottles. The pitchman was giving him a good spiel, too, but the character seemed reluctant.

The pitchman was a little man, skinny, with a big adam's apple bobbing up and down along a half-shaved neck. He wore a straw hat and showed a lot of gold teeth. They glittered in the sun when he opened his mouth to give out with the spiel.

"Knock off one set of bottles, and win a doll," he chanted. His cane waved at the prizes shelved on either side of the booth. "Three balls for a dime. Knock off two sets of bottles, and win a beautiful, luscious, tender, sugar-cured ham. Knock off three

sets, and win one of those superb big-name radios, gents."

The "superb" radios were little kitchen models in plastic—about ten inches long, six inches wide and six deep. There were three on display, two white and one brown.

The farmers were still urging their pal to throw when the pitchman saw me. He gave me a wink with his little, black-pea eyes. "Here's a man who'll try! Here's a man who looks like he could throw a mean baseball. Step right up!" He gave me the wink again.

I didn't quite get the deal, but since this booth was my assignment, I stepped up. Besides, I thought, a radio would be a welcome addition to my two-bit office.

The pitchman took my money and handed me three baseballs. The bottles were stacked on a wooden tub with three as a base, two on top of them and one at the peak. It *looked* simple. It *was* simple—for me. I had pitched enough baseballs and footballs in my time.

My first toss hit pyramid center, with enough spin to clean the table except for one bottle lying on its side. I got that with the second pitch. The little guy set them up again, and I knocked them down again. I hesitated between taking the ham and trying for the radio, but decided the radio would last longer. I needed

three balls to clean the table the last time.

The pitchman reached up and brought down the brown radio. I said, "How about a white one, pal?"

His eyes turned funny. He stood very still for a moment, then shrugged and started to turn around. I said, "Oh hell, this is good enough," took the radio and stepped back.

My performance seemed to have inspired the farmer. He laid down a dime and picked up three baseballs. I leaned against the counter to watch. Whatever went on here wasn't on the surface. I had the feeling the pitchman had been expecting me, from the way he handed out the wink. But that didn't make much sense — yet.

So I stayed, looking as casual as I could, and watched the farmer, whose pals called him Teel, show professional baseball form. He clipped off three wins faster than I had, and got a nice white radio for it.

"Martha'll sure be pleased to have this in her kitchen," he said. He started off and came back. "Maybe I ought to get another one, so she can give it for presents."

His friends backed him up in that. The little pitchman didn't look too pleased, but he shrugged and nodded. Teel wound up and let go. The ball was perfect, clean-

ing the table. The little guy set up the bottles again and Teel knocked them down the second time.

The pitchman waved his cane. "How about a nice ham, brother?"

Someone laughed. "Teel's got a smokehouse full of hams."

"I want another radio," Teel said.

"Three in a row twice is hard to hit."

"It ain't hard for him," someone said. "He fanned twenty Sunnyvale batters last Sunday."

I got a laugh out of that. The pitchman didn't, though. He wasn't enjoying the prospect of facing the local baseball hotshot. His stock could go fast against a setup like this.

Now the little guy was looking over the crowd, past my shoulder. I saw his eyes widen, then swing to me. They were small eyes, very dark, and suddenly there was a mean look in them.

He said, "How about resting while someone else tries?"

"I feel like pitching," Teel said.

A man of about my width, but a head shorter, pushed forward. I recognized him as an unsavory bar-bum I had seen drifting around town at times.

"Lemme pitch a couple," he said. "You been here all afternoon, bud."

Teel looked down at this character and away. He resumed rubbing the ball he held. The heavy-

set guy gave him an elbow. "I said, move over."

The farmer wasn't having any. "I got here first."

There was a nasty look on the wide man's face. It was a slightly battered face, like mine. But where my nose was bent twice, his was flattened to one side of his face. His ears were cauliflowered, too. He looked as if he would enjoy getting tough about it.

"Bud, you just step aside . . ."

The whole group of farmers shifted their weight, and a soft sound, like a sighing wind, rose from them. They began to close in. It was very nice teamwork. I thought, *You guys aren't smart. Farmers haven't been yokels for thirty years now.*

It was obvious to me, and evidently to the farmers, too. The heavy boy was a shill, and the attendant wanted him up there very badly.

The attendant wasn't quite as stupid as he looked. He said, "Let him shoot, friend. He says he's hot." Their eyes met, and the wide boy nodded and stepped back. The sigh went through the crowd again, and they relaxed a little. The farmer wound up and pitched.

It was perfect, just like the first one. The bottles jumped and rocked, but when they had settled, two still stood, one on either end. It was like a split in bowling.

The farmer blinked and spat and took another ball. He wound up and got a strike on the left one. It just leaned over, wobbled, and came back. So he had one ball left and the same split to work on.

"You see that?" one wag said. "Jumped off and right back on. You got 'em trained, mister?"

"Tough luck," the attendant said. "One ball to go."

I leaned over the counter. I caught the pitchman by the front of his shirt and lifted him six inches off the ground.

"Friend," I said softly, "give the man two balls and take your hand off that magnet."

His little black eyes popped out and the meanness narrowed his mouth. "Who in hell are you?" I thought he looked a little sick.

I shook him, but not too roughly. "Want me to say it louder, chum?" I said. "Set the man up a square table this time."

The little attendant opened his mouth and breathed stale beer at me. Before he could do anything cute like yelling, "Hey, rube," I pushed a gentle hand against his face. "Now behave," I told him.

The heavy-set character was beginning to ease my way. I heard the crowd stir again. I jerked the attendant up a few more inches. "It's thirty against two here, chum."

He was beginning to look worried, but then he must have seen something over my shoulder. He

shook his head sideways, getting free of my hand, and bawled.

Someone conked me from behind. I dropped the little guy and folded over the counter, rolled, and came up with my back to it. My head hurt in the old way, making me sick to my stomach, but I was sore, too—a little too sore to know exactly what I was doing. A roustabout was there, swinging a big stick. The heavy boy had closed in on the other side.

I made a grab for the guy with the stick. He swung again, thumping my shoulder. I had two hands on his neck when the shill jumped me. The farmers got into action then. All I could see were feet and knees and swirling dust. I was on the bottom, hanging onto the guy who had sapped me. But from the sounds, I knew it had turned into a general riot.

Someone blew a whistle then, and a siren screamed nearby. I lay there, after knocking my man silly and using him to cover me from random feet. After a while, the mob thinned and daylight began to appear. When the dust had settled, the cops were in control.

This was outside the city limits, so the sheriff's office had the say. I saw Grimsby, old Poo-bah himself, and wished I were somewhere else. Just as I feared, the job had backfired.

"I should have known," he said, "you'd be in this."

"They pulled the magnet gag on some farmer," I said. "I objected."

The pitchman and his shill were backed up against the counter, looking very unhappy. The remains of the farmers, about twenty-five, were lined up at right angles. About a dozen carny helpers were there, too. Finally, a dapper little man in ice-cream pants came clicking up.

"Here, what's the trouble, officer?"

This was Jim Nichols, the man who had hired me. It was his twenty bucks I carried in my pocket. He spotted me, but his eyes said they didn't know me. I returned the compliment.

The dust had settled, most of it in my mouth from the way it felt, and things were beginning to clear in my mind. The wallop on the head hadn't been quite as tough as I had thought. I stepped forward and repeated my story to Nichols.

He turned on the rat-faced attendant. "That's twice I've had complaints about you, Ormes. Is this true?"

The sheriff said, "Don't you know how your own games are run?"

Nichols bridled like a nipped dog. "Sheriff, I rent out these concessions. I am not responsible for the actions of these men."

Ormes, the pitchman, said, "This farmer got greedy. He won

a radio and wanted another. I can't let no rube Bob Feller clean out my stock, can I?"

"If he wins on a game of chance, you can," the sheriff said.

I shook my head to get the last of the buzzing out. "I suggested he let the farmer do that second one all over again."

Grimsby looked from Nichols to Ormes. "If you ain't beat him up too bad, let him try."

Ormes looked like he wanted to squawk, but one glare from Nichols stopped him. When Grimsby added, "Or we lock you up," he set up the bottles.

I went right after him and checked them. It *looked* all wood, this table. But a closer check showed iron insets painted the color of the table top. Some of the bottles had iron insets, too. I showed the setup to Grimsby.

The farmers didn't like it a bit, but they cheered when the sheriff found the electric cable that ran from the stand to the push-button on the counter. He gave a yank and disconnected the works.

"Now throw, Teel," he said. He was grinning, too, pleased with himself. "Make like that's Sunnyvale up there."

Teel was still in one piece, as long and as lugubrious as ever. He wound up, pitched and got a strike. The bottles flew off their table on the first pitch. He stood there after he had made it and looked at Ormes, not smiling.

Ormes reached up and got the last radio, a white plastic one. He handed it over, not happily. Teel tucked both radios under his arm and moved off. "Thanks," he said.

He turned and came back to me. "You, too, he added. His sun-faded blue eyes were speculative. "But I don't know why you did it."

"I don't like to see a man cheated," I said.

He pointed to a bruise on my face. "No more do I. Come on and have a beer on me."

I did, carrying my radio. This carny was no place for Jake Parker at the moment, anyway. We found a tavern on the edge of the grounds and, with about five other farm boys tagging along, went inside. It was cool and pleasant. So was the beer.

Teel seemed pleased with his prizes. "I'd have liked a brown one," he said. "Then Martha could choose which color she wanted to keep."

I took the hint. "It doesn't matter to me," I said, and swapped for one of his white radios. That done, I thanked him for the beer and went back to my office.

I had done my job—maybe not with the finesse Nichols wanted, but I had done it. He had offered me fifty to find out what was wrong with Ormes' pitch—twenty down and thirty when the job was finished. I had thirty bucks still coming.

Nichols walked in, not an hour later. I was smoking a six-cent cigar and winding up another beer when he clipped into the room. He looked as dapper as usual, despite the heat.

He also looked mad. "You sure messed hell out of things," he said.

My hand was out for the thirty bucks. I pulled it back, empty, and laid it on the desk top. "I found out, didn't I?"

Nichols snorted. "Found out he used magnets. That's an ancient gag. Do I pay fifty bucks to learn that?"

"You said, 'Find out what he's up to,'" I reminded him.

"Find out—yes," he squawked. "And why. Would he cause a riot to save a ten-buck radio?"

"You want a lot for your fifty," I said.

He rocked back and forth on his toes. "If you can't do it, I'll get someone who can."

That thirty bucks due me looked very, very big. The twenty I had would help for a while, but I need to eat. I also needed a little rep as a good detective. Starting a riot wasn't doing it. Not with Grimsby.

"All right," I said.

Nichols marched out. I leaned back, wearily, to check over what I knew and try to fit it into a sensible answer. Why would a punk like Ormes raise such hell over a lousy little radio?

I took the radio I had won and

gave it a good going over. There was nothing inside but cheap tubes and wiring. I plugged it into the wall and it played—not good, but it played.

At dark, I went out to eat. I came back, thinking so hard about it that I was inside the office door before I realized anything was wrong. I remembered the odd way Ormes had acted over the radios, but it didn't make much sense, no matter how I twisted it in my mind.

What I stepped into *did* make sense. The office was dark, but I wasn't alone in it. I had one hand reaching for the light switch when I heard the footfall, a light, near-inaudible sound.

I dropped my hand away from the wall and went for my gun. Something hard rammed into my belly, driving me backward. I clawed and got nothing. I rolled over as I hit the floor and came up swinging. For the second time that day, someone conked me. This time it was a good job. I sensed it coming, but couldn't duck fast enough. Lightning exploded in my brain. I went down and out.

I came to, feeling like the wrong end of a six-day drunk. I was still in the office. Carefully, I got to my feet and wobbled to the door. I turned the light on this time and made it to the wash-stand. Cold water helped a little, and I staggered to my desk. A

shot of whiskey from the bottle in my drawer helped a little more. After a while, I could look around and see what had happened.

It was senseless for anyone to knock over my office. There had never been anything in it. I made a quick check. My few files were still intact. My desk hadn't been disturbed. Everything was the same. Then I got it . . .

The radio was missing!

I remembered what Nichols had said—that Ormes wouldn't have started a riot over a ten-buck radio. But Ormes had—and he had carried it one step farther. My aching head was proof of that.

Still, I was no further along than I had been. The big *why* was still unanswered.

At ten o'clock, I was still sitting there, still as far as ever from an answer. The agony in my head was subsiding, however, and the rattle of the doorknob only made me groan. I got up and answered it.

Grimsby came in, looking sore as hell, "I hear you saw this farmer, Teel."

"He bought me a beer."

"Was he drunk?"

I said, "No. He wasn't that kind. He wanted to get home to his Martha with the radios." Grimsby's pulled-down mouth worried me more than usual. "What's wrong?"

"Teel didn't get home," he said.

"He killed himself halfway there."

That was like getting a third conk on the head. I stared at Grimsby, my mouth hanging open. He fed the details to me in capsule form. Teel had got his pickup truck and headed over the hills for home. Halfway there he had to drive down a graveled hill and cross a wooden bridge. He had evidently lost control of the truck and hit the bridge railing. The car had crashed through, dropping thirty feet into a pot-hole in the river. Teel had drowned.

Grimsby concluded, "That guy drives that road week after week, snow or rain or what have you. It don't make sense."

But it was beginning to make sense—at least for me. For the first time, I was getting some ideas. They began to come quick and fast. I almost said something aloud, and then I realized Grimsby hadn't come up here just to tell me about Teel.

Instead of blurting out everything, I said, "Why come to me?"

"You," Grimsby said, "started the riot."

"I told you about that."

He ignored me. "Some of the farm boys told me how you waltzed in and won the first radio. Were you shilling for Ormes, maybe?"

"Hell, no! I just wanted a radio."

Grimsby grunted. I knew what

was biting him. He didn't like me to begin with, so he was hoping to connect me with this trouble some way. He came right out and said it. "I got ideas," he told me. "If I find you're hooked up in this, Parker, you're through around here."

He turned and strode out, still sore. I listened to his footsteps recede, then I grabbed my phone. I was connected with the "trouble," all right—more than I liked, perhaps. But if what I thought was the truth, I wasn't going to let Grimsby, or anyone else, scare me away. I was getting good and sore myself.

I called the head office and gave them instructions, telling them to wire the answer. If this was a cold lead, they'd take the expenses out of my hide, I knew that. But it had to be done. I hung up. Then I got my hat and set it gingerly on my aching head. There were still a few things I wanted to know.

I walked carefully, to make sure Grimsby didn't have a tail on me. As far as I could tell, I was clear when I got to the carny grounds. The show was still going strong. I found Nichols in his railway-car office and went in. He looked worried and unhappy.

"Did you hear?" he asked me.

"I heard," I said. I sat down and studied him. "You've pussy-footed long enough. I want to know just why you had me put

the bite on Ormes." I was sore.

Nichols got up nervously and checked to see that his shades were drawn. When he sat down, he was sweating and not quite so dapper. "Trouble," he muttered. "Nothing but trouble! In every town, it's some little thing. But this is the worst. We're jinxed, Parker. This winds it up—a suicide."

I let that last item pass. "Give me a list of these troubles," I said.

Nichols was vague. Troubles, to a carny man, are nine-tenths superstition. He could read an ingrown toenail as a bad omen. But I got enough to know he was scared of his own shadow—enough to give me a lead.

I said, "I can clear it up for you, but it'll cost another zero on that fifty you hired me for." He squawked, but I hung on. "I'm sticking my professional and personal neck out," I told him. "Take it or leave it."

He took it—and paid half in advance. I went out fast after that. Getting in my car, I headed out the county highway. In about two miles, it turned from concrete to gravel. Three more miles, and I came to the top of the long hill. Here I stopped. It was all silent below, though, so I drove on.

The bridge rail was still shattered, and a red warning lantern glowed alongside. That was the only sign. Pulling the car off the road, I got my flashlight and made

a quick survey. I saw where they had worked, going for the body and the car. What I needed, I thought, was a nice cooling swim.

I stripped in the bushes, along the riverside and dived into the pothole. The water wasn't too bad, and I kept on diving. It wasn't much fun, feeling around in the dark water, but when I clamped my hand on the first radio, I knew it was worth it.

Despite the cool water, I was sweating a little when I got through. I had a whole shore full of stuff to look at. There were a lot of groceries, and the two radios. These were all that I wanted. I squatted there in the dark and turned my light on them.

For a minute, it didn't register. They were just two white plastic radios. And then it hit me and I almost let out a whoop. I was on the right track.

Dressed, I took the radios in the car and drove back to town. There was a fat wire under the office door, and I spread it open after locking myself in. What I wanted to know was there.

The carnival had hit twelve good-sized towns on its summer-long trip. Ours was one of the last. At each stop, there had been a nice heist. The details were all there. In one place, it had been jewels from a charity ball, in another, a fancy store had been knocked over. In another, a bank messenger had been found rolled

in a ditch. On it went, and everyone was still listed as unsolved.

It was fifteen minutes to midnight. I barreled out to the carnny and got to Ormes' booth just under the wire. He was there. A last customer and his girl friend were walking off with a kewpie doll. The midway was almost empty. The barkers were silent, and the peanut machines had been stilled. The merry-go-round still tinkled away in the distance, but it sounded tired.

I said, "Give me three, chum."

Ormes recognized me, and his eyes narrowed. "Check it," he said shortly. "You done enough damage for one day."

I smiled at him and picked up the baseballs. He opened his mouth. I lost my smile. "You really want to make trouble?" I asked him. "Maybe I should get Nichols over here—or the sheriff again."

His mouth shut. I wound up and started pitching. There was no magnet this time. I was tired, but by being careful, I racked up three wins. "A radio," I said.

There were two on the shelf. Ormes reached up and got one, a brown plastic job. I said, "Not that one." He shrugged and got the other. I said, "No. I want one just like the number you swiped from my office."

I could hear his quick inhale. He swung around, in a swift, cat-like pivot, and pitched the radio

at my head. I ducked and started over the counter after him. He slipped aside and hit a light switch with his hand. The booth was clamped by darkness.

I went after him, but he made it through a door into the rear part of the stand. I got in myself when a gun blasted. The bullet made a swift, angry sound as it went by my ear. I got my own gun out and hit the floor. Ormes was moving in back somewhere. I could hear a box tip, and I fired at it. His answering shot kicked dirt into my face. I returned the favor and heard him swear.

Then all hell broke loose. I could hear them coming from front and the rear. In a moment, the lights came on, blindingly. I stood up, my hands high, as a big deputy walked in and leveled a gun on me. Grimsby was right behind him.

They hauled Ormes upright. His right shoulder was shattered, but that was all. He was still alive. Grimsby looked from him to me.

"This about winds you up, Parker," he said. I must have looked stupid, because he added, "Think we're suckers? I've had a tail on you all the time. I don't know what you and your pal here fought about, but I'll find out soon enough."

It was my turn to talk and fast. I said, "If you want the answer, look in some of those boxes marked *radios*." I lowered one

hand long enough to fish out the wire I had got. I gave it to Grimsby.

I went on, "Don't you get it? Ormes and some friends are in the fence racket. They move into a town, and jewels, or bills of big denomination, are stolen. Then Ormes puts them in dummy radio tubes. At another town along the line, a hand-picked shill steps up and wins a radio—one of the specials. He takes the dummy tubes out and puts in real ones. Any check on the radio shows nothing wrong. But when he breaks the dummies open, he has the loot from the heist job back down the line. He fences it for the organization."

Grimsby studied the wire. Then he studied me. Finally, looked at Ormes. The little pitchman wasn't saying anything. But his eyes were hating me plenty.

I said, "The shill here was a guy with a battered face. When I walked up, Ormes thought I was the one. So, when I won a radio so easily, he gave me the special. He caused the riot because the real shill walked up then, and Ormes realized I wasn't his man after all. He wanted to swap sets on me under cover of the noise. But the farm boys moved too fast for him. His next best bet was to swipe it out of my office before I got wise to anything."

"The only trouble was, he didn't know I'd swapped my

brown set with Teel in exchange for a white one. When he found that out, he added things up and went after Teel.

"There," I said, "is the guy who sent Teel off the bridge. He hid in Teel's truck. When he saw his chance, he clipped Teel and took over. Maybe he wasn't planning on murder, but that's the way it turned out."

"Sounds nice," said Grimsby, "but can you prove it?"

What a thick skull he had! "Sure," I said. "When I went diving, I brought up two radios—both white plastic. But Teel had started home with one white one and the brown set I gave him. Ormes, here, did too good a job, trying to make his murder look accidental."

Ormes cut loose then. He took a swipe at one of the deputies' guns, got his hand on it and sent a shot at me. He was off balance, and the bullet only nicked my leg. I lowered my hands and went for him. Grimsby's gun made a flat

sound. By the time I hit Ormes, he was already going limp.

Grimsby had nothing more to say. He began breaking open radio boxes. In every third one, we found dummy tubes. In the dummy tubes was the finest collection of diamonds and emeralds and thousand-dollar banknotes a man would ever want to see. When the stuff was all laid out, we could only stand and stare.

Grimsby took a deep breath. "You win, Parker. I wasn't wrong about private cops, but I guess maybe I was wrong about one of them."

I thought of what could have happened if he hadn't tailed me and been there when the shooting started.

I said, "If it's okay with you, sheriff, just keep right on not trusting me. I'm beginning to like having cops for bodyguards."

"In that case," he said, "I'll take you home myself."

I took a good radio along. I figured I'd earned it.



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CARTER SPRAGUE

A lady on the lam — a strangler on the loose — a stranger at the bar! If Wanda let the man pay for her drink, she wondered where it was going to lead . . .

A Present for Peter

WANDA SAT upright on the unmade bed and looked at the nylon blouse and nylon stockings draped dismally over the radiator cover that formed the sill of the room's one window. On her flat, pretty face—powdered and lipsticked—was an expression of discontent and of worry underneath, worry that amounted to fear.

But Wanda was refusing resolutely to allow herself to dwell on the source of her fear. She concentrated her concern on the little things—on the fact that what she was wearing, plus the things drying on the windowsill, plus the skirt and jacket draped carefully over the single straight chair, were all the clothes she had to her name.

Nor did Wanda need to open the saddle-stitched leather shoulder-bag on the bed beside her to know what it contained. It held make-up gear, a scattering of bobby-pins, matchboxes, movie-ticket stubs, a small mirror, a lipstick-stained lace handkerchief, a checkbook, some cleanex and,

in the purse, eleven dollars and sixty-seven cents in cash.

With the green jade elephant that lifted a defiant trunk at her from the yellow oak table in front of the bed, the room contained everything Wanda owned in the world. At any rate, it held everything she dared claim as her own. She had been in the hotel four days now—she had paid rent for a week in advance. She had to figure out some way to get in touch with Danny in the next three days, or she'd be out in the street.

Wanda was incognito, in hiding, on the lam. Some ninety-nine hours earlier, Peter Corell had been garroted on the gentle curve of the sectional sofa in his East Sixty-third Street apartment. When she heard the news of his murder, Wanda had been sitting in a bar off Madison Avenue, drinking a sloe-gin fizz and waiting for the eleven-o'clock television news to pass, so she could ease around the corner to join him. The green jade elephant had been in her bag. It was the eve of Peter's birthday, and the

elephant was to have been a present. A girl got tired of giving only money to a man she was fond of.

Just how fond she had been of Peter, Wanda hadn't given herself a chance to find out since the story came over the telenews. It was the last line of the dispatch, as uttered by the announcer, that had frightened her. ". . . and police expect to find the motive for Corell's murder either among his business associates or business rivals, or among his lady-friends, who are said to be numerous."

If the cops got hold of her, Wanda Reese was a very dead pigeon. She had had her troubles with the cops as a kid, before she had gotten smart. She could still remember the smells—the spit-sweat-and-tobacco smell of the station houses, the woman-vomit-and-formaldehyde smell of the detention cells, the lye-soap-and-moldy-paint smell of the house of correction where she had spent two years.

Cops! The thought of them curdled her now, as it had curdled her four evenings earlier, in the Madison Avenue bar, as it had curdled her when she was still a runny-nosed alleycat, stealing from markets and dime stores. Once they got hold of her, she was finished as surely, and a lot less cleanly and quickly, than Peter had been. If they caught her, they'd crucify her.

She couldn't bear thinking

about them, even now. And she couldn't do much about keeping away from them for long if she sat in this crummy side-street hotel room until her dough ran out and the manager booted her out. The laugh was that she had plenty of dough in the bank—enough to take her almost anywhere she wanted to go. But she didn't dare write a check. She had a comfortable East Side apartment with plenty of dresses hanging in the closets, plenty of food in the refrigerator, plenty of bottles in the little bar Danny had had her put in—plenty of bottles, that is, if the lousy cops hadn't drunk them all empty waiting around for her to show up.

It was a laugh, all right, but it wasn't funny. Her situation reminded her of an old movie she had seen once on teevee. It was about a nutty old millionaire who had hated his relatives and given his dough away, a million bucks at a whack, to people he picked at random from the phone book. One of them was George Raft, and he had been a professional check forger. So, when he got the good check for a million, he hadn't been able to cash it. *If I Had a Million*—that was the name of the movie.

Who the hell cared what the name of it was? Wanda wanted a drink. She couldn't think while she was alone. All her thoughts did was go 'round in circles. She

needed someone to talk to, to listen to, to get her brain functioning. The trouble was, Danny had lammed, too. He'd done some sort of business with Peter—that was how Wanda had met Peter in the first place. She didn't know too many of Danny's friends very well—and she didn't know any of them she dared trust. She knew, without a shred of proof, that Danny had strangled Peter Corell.

At any rate, she needed a drink and some companionship—the crummy hotel didn't have a TV in the room. It didn't even have a lousy radio. The bar downstairs was full of creeps and dead horseplayers, and she didn't dare go to any of her regular places, or to Danny's. But right now, it was better than nothing. She got up and took the things off the windowseat. The panty-girdle was still slightly damp, and there was a runner in one of the stockings . . .

The bar was dim and dirty and dull. The television screen, set cat-corner under the ceiling at one end of the bar, was on, with the sound turned low so as not to interfere with the juke-box, which was blasting a rock-and-roll dirge by a trick-voiced girl singer. At the red-check-covered tables in the rear, one drab threesome and an even drabber couple were seated. The mouse-grey males and a middle-aged woman with un-

waved hair and too much rouge sat midway along the bar itself. Wanda moved to one end, to be as far away from them as possible, and noted the man alone.

At least, she thought, this one *looked* like a man, not like an aging insect from whom some spider had long-since sucked all the juice. She wondered what had brought him to a dump like this. Charlie, the bartender, came up and said, "What'll it be tonight, miss?"

Wanda ordered a sloe-gin. She didn't care a hell of a lot for the taste of alcohol—too bitter for her liking—but she liked its effect inside her. Sloe gin was at least half-way sweet. When she rummaged in her bag for money, Charlie waved a hand in front of her. "No dice," he said. "The gentleman's paying."

"No fooling?" said Wanda, her suspicions mounting. For a moment she was tempted to turn it down. But the pitiful amount of cash in her bag stopped such foolishness. Hell, she thought, maybe the jerk was just lonely, like herself. He'd sure picked the right place to be lonely in, if he was looking for action. But she couldn't afford to take chances. "Who is he, Charlie?" she asked.

Charlie shrugged and swabbed the bar with his towel. "Never saw him before tonight," he replied, disinterested. "He's staying upstairs, that's all I know."

Wanda tried to get her thoughts in order. When she didn't answer, Charlie said, "Well, what'll I tell him?"

"Oh hell, tell him to come on down," said Wanda. It had occurred to her that, if the stranger was a cop, she had nothing to lose—since it would be already too late. Maybe he was okay—anyway, he'd be somebody to talk to.

He *looked* okay on closer view, as nearly as she could tell in the half-light. He had good shoulders that weren't all padding, like Danny's, and his face was square and almost handsome. She said, "Thanks for the drink, mister . . ."

"Byrne," he said, "Michael Byrne—with a y and an e and no s. A pleasure." He had, she noted, a sort of out-of-town accent, like some of Danny's friends from St. Louis or Chicago.

She said, "Charlie tells me you're staying upstairs, Mr. Byrne. What's the matter—couldn't you get a room at the Ritz Towers?"

He grinned—Michael Byrne had a nice grin that showed white teeth that looked real. He said, "Believe it or not, I was lucky to get a room in this dump. New York is full to here." He drew a line across his forehead, added, "Conventions."

Wanda said, "No kidding?" She knew about conventions. Before she met Danny and got set, she'd been on call to serve conventions,

as she had been on call for other services. Nightmare jobs, she and the other girls had called them. Nightmares of hairy bellies and hairless heads, of clutching hands and slapping hands and crude innuendo, when all you were supposed to do was smile and drink and deliver on demand—but profitable nightmares. She said, "You with one of them—conventions, I mean?"

"Not really." He shook his head. "I'm here to see a few people on business."

The voice bothered her a little. She said, "Where are you from, Michael?"

"Mike," he told her gravely, but with a nice light in his eyes. "I'm not exactly the Michael type—too formal."

"Okay, Mike—where are you from? Your voice isn't New York."

He smiled again—this time ruefully. It made him look about fifteen years old. He said, "I didn't know it showed. I'm from the Middle West—Cincinnati, to be exact. By the way, you haven't told me your name."

"I know it." She almost snapped the words. Then, relenting because he was so polite and looked hurt, she added, "My name is Carla—Carla White." That was what she'd signed in as on the hotel card. She'd heard it somewhere on a teevee show.

"Okay, Carla." His eyes were

smiling. "How about another drink?"

"Don't mind if I do," she told him, smiling back for the first time . . .

A couple of hours later, back in the cell that was her room, Wanda took off her clothes. She started to throw them on the floor, as if she was still at home, with Ruby coming in every morning to clean and pick up. Then she remembered she hadn't any closetful of things, any bureau drawers full of lingerie—she pronounced it *lawnggray* even in her thoughts. She folded them neatly over the chair.

In the mirror, she looked at her body—she still had a figure, thank God—though how, she sometimes wondered, considering the abuse it had taken. Maybe she could get a job modeling in the garment district—but that meant a return to hairy bellies and bald heads, and she wasn't ready to face *that*—not yet, anyway.

She sat on the lumpy, unmade bed and scratched herself and realized it was hot. It was funny, meeting Mike that way, with him living just down the hall, beyond the semi-private bath. She could hear the shower running through the biscuit-thin walls. He had told her he was going to take a bath. That was another thing she liked about Mike—he was clean. He hadn't even propositioned her, just thanked her, very solemnly, for giving him a pleasant evening.

Still, she had to be careful. She didn't really know a damned thing about Mike, except that he'd bought her some drinks and talked to her pleasantly in his out-of-town voice and had moved into a room only a couple of doors removed from hers. She lit a cigarette and lay back on the rumpled sheet and tried to figure things out.

Mike was polite—in that he reminded her of Peter. But his politeness was a sincere, middle-class politeness, not the high-class mockery that Peter's was—had been. Funny, she found it hard to think of Peter as dead. She wondered if she had been in love with Peter. She had certainly acted crazy enough—giving him all that money and that elephant. She turned her head to look at it, as it stood, its trunk uplifted, green and defiant by the ashtray.

Silly thing for a grown man to do—collect green jade toy elephants. Peter had had forty-nine of them, all in different positions, all green jade. When he showed them to her, he had said, "Believe it or not, they're hard to get and they cost a lot. Almost as much as women." She had been angry at that, until she saw he couldn't mean it about her. Peter was always mocking himself.

She had been surprised when he made the pitch for her—why Wanda, she couldn't help wondering, after some of the women he

had had—countesses, society girls, movie actresses. After the men she had known from girlhood on, even Danny, he had been something very new and very different. Wanda had gone overboard. And now Peter was dead, murdered by Danny, and she and Danny were on the lam.

She thought about Danny. He was almost Peter's opposite number. He was tough and not handsome with his busted nose, and not a talker. But Danny was smart. She never had been too sure about what he did, but he'd had to be smart, or he never could have set her up the way he had. Of course, if he hadn't had dough, she'd never have spit on him—he was too much her own kind.

She wondered how he ever got associated with a guy like Peter Corell, a guy who made his living promoting funds for big charities. Danny wasn't exactly charitable—except where she was concerned. He'd been real goofed about her. He'd told her so a hundred times.

"You're a very classy doll for a mug like me—stay that way, and we'll get on." Those had been his words. And she had stayed that way until Peter came along and made his pitch. Sure, she'd given him money these last three months. Guys like Peter Corell came high. High class, high cash. That was the way of the world as she knew it.

She looked at the elephant again, and it reminded her of the afternoon four days ago, before Peter was murdered. Danny had come to see her, the way he always did afternoons unless he had a daytime deal on. Danny worked nights mostly, so they had their times together afternoons. Sometimes she'd gone out with him evenings, when he wanted to show her off or needed a girl on his arm—that was how she had met Peter. But mostly, the nights were lonely, like right now. She wasn't a girl who could ever get used to being really alone. Maybe that was why she had fallen for Peter's pitch.

Danny had been in a good mood for him that afternoon. He had shaved before he got there, for a change. "Hadda see a character for lunch—got a deal on," he had said, yawning and revealing the gold teeth in the back of his mouth. "This gettin' up in the middle of the night kills me. But it's worth it." He had given her a hug and said, "Big deal on, baby."

Wanda had been pleased. She had gone into the bedroom to get ready. But Danny hadn't followed. After a while, she had gone out, and Danny had been gone. She hadn't been able to figure it out at first. She was planning to ask Peter about it on the date that had never come off because of the murder. But he must have seen the elephant.

She put out her cigarette and decided she was crazy to let her thoughts wander when she ought to be concentrating on a safe way to get in touch with Danny. She had an idea of the place to call—but she didn't feel safe about doing it. Not with a murder involved, and the cops sniffing around for Peter's friends and connections. She remembered as if it was yesterday the time Peter had told her, laughing at her question, "You might say Danny's on my payroll."

She didn't want to get Danny into any more trouble—and she couldn't afford to get in trouble herself. She thought about the cops and felt nausea grip her. All those smells . . . She hated being alone like this, at a time like this. Almost, she wished Mike would rap on the door. She listened, but the water had stopped running. Mike must have turned in. What a lousy break to meet a gentleman right now, she thought . . .

She stuck it out as long as she could the next day. It was rainy, damp and hot, and she had a hangover. About three o'clock, her stomach was getting bigger and emptier inside her, and the walls were closing in, the dirty grey walls with their cracks and splotches made by God knew what. She felt sticky all over and took a shower and still felt sticky when she was done. Lord, she

was tired of wearing the same crummy clothes. They hadn't been crummy when she went into hiding—they had been new and crisp and expensive, from a store on Fifty-seventh Street. She had wanted to look nice for Peter, he always ignored her clothes, as if they weren't worth talking about . . .

Charlie got her a bowl of mangy chili—she needed something powerful that she could taste over her hangover—and a beer, and let her look at the tabloid someone had left. They were still playing Peter's murder up big, she saw. It scared her a little—she hadn't realized Peter was so important. You'd think he was Sergei Rubenstein or something, the fuss they were making. In a way, it made her proud to have been one of his girls. At least, when it was all over, she'd have something to talk about. She got the green jade elephant out of her bag and looked at it, then put it away. A hundred and ninety dollars it had cost her—and all she had was a lousy eleven dollars and seven cents!

She put it away, but it had given her an idea. If she was unable to get in touch with Danny, maybe she could sell it for a hundred—or even fifty. That would be enough to get her out of town till the mess blew over and they caught Peter's killer. She could get a job waiting tables or some-

thing, maybe in Boston or Philly or somewhere. The thought made her feel better. That way, she'd be in the clear until something broke and she could claim her own things and the money in her bank account. She asked Charlie to bring her a sloe-gin. The beer and chili were giving her heartburn.

"On me," said a pleasant, out-of-town voice from behind her. She saw Mike standing there, in the mirror. She said hello and smiled, and he smiled back and said, "Lordie, isn't it hot!" And then, "Let's see that little elephant. I didn't know they made them in jade."

She got it out of the bag again and said, "Want to buy it? Like everything else around here, it's for sale."

He made a clicking sound with his tongue against his front teeth. "So cynical so early?" he asked with mock reproof.

"Maybe it's the weather—thanks," she said, picking up the drink and sipping it. "I don't really want to sell it yet, but maybe I'll have to. I bought it as a present for a friend who isn't a friend anymore." In a way, that was no more than the truth, she thought, since Peter certainly wasn't anything anymore. She added, "It cost a hundred and ninety bucks at—" she named the store on East Sixtieth Street where she had bought it, the only import shop

in New York that carried green jade elephants.

"Why not take it back and collect your money there?" he asked.

She couldn't tell him she didn't dare. She said, "I don't want to go anywhere that reminds me of this friend."

He chuckled. "I didn't know you were a romantic," he told her over the rim of his own glass. Once again she noticed his even, white teeth with approval.

"You'd be surprised," she said.

"I like surprises," he told her.

They laughed and, after a while, he bought her another drink. When she made a move to pay for this one, he shook his head and said, "Expense account. Let's live it up a little."

It was while they were on it that Wanda decided to take the plunge. She said, "Mike, I want you to do me a favor. You've done me a lot already, but this isn't much except it's important to me."

For a moment, his eyes were calculating. Then he was smiling again. "Sure," he said, "anything I can do."

She told him, "A friend of mine is in a jam, and she can't get hold of the guy to tell him." She gave him instructions to call one of Danny's cronies, gave him the phone number, added, "Tell him Wanda's friend wants to see him tonight at this hotel. Give him my room number, so I can get Wanda straightened out."

His face fell. He said, "If this is an assignation, I was rather hoping for a date with you myself. I had a lot of fun with you last night. I'm having a good time now."

"If you want to keep on having it," she told him with all the promise she could muster, "make that call like I asked you to."

He said, "Sure thing, Carla," and went back into the booth.

He came out four minutes later and said, "All done. Joe says he'll pass the word for your friend." By the way he said *your friend*, Wanda knew she hadn't fooled him with her subterfuge. For some reason she was glad she hadn't. She didn't want Mike to be dumb. *Hey!* she thought and took a quick rein on herself. Why should she care if Mike was dumb or not, unless she was beginning to like him. She wondered if it was just the drinks or something else. This was no time to be getting tangled up with anyone new—or was it? The matter, she decided, was one that required thought. She allowed Mike to buy her a third sloe-gin.

He was nice. He told her about Cincinnati and how he hated, yet was fascinated, by New York. "Every time I come here I can't wait to get back home," he said. "Yet, every time I'm home, I can't wait to get back to New York. Crazy, isn't it?"

"Real crazy," she replied.

He said, "Maybe I will buy that elephant. It's pretty, kind of, and I ought to have something for a souvenir."

"To take home to your wife?" she asked him and was startled by the sharpness of her voice. What did she care if this guy was married?

"I had a wife," he told her, "but she died four years ago."

She laid a hand over his and looked into his eyes, which were brown. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm awfully sorry." And she was sorry, which disturbed her almost as much as the relief she felt inside that he was not married.

"Thanks," he told her. "There's no need to be upset, though I appreciate it. It happened too long ago." He looked at his watch, added, "Dammit, I've got to run. Have another on me. Then lay off till this evening. If there's any more drinking, let's do it together."

"Okay, honey," she said. "If I'm not here, I'll be upstairs."

She watched him leave and wished she hadn't had him make the call that would bring Danny. Mike was no Peter, who would take Danny as a joke. Life was funny, she thought. One minute you were nowhere, with nobody, the next minute you had too much. She had her drink and went back upstairs. She only had a little over ten dollars now, but she wasn't scared anymore—not with Danny

coming and Mike so ready to help.

She made her bed this time and smartened up the dismal room as best she could and wished she had some flowers. She got out the green jade elephant and put it back on the table—and thought, not about Peter Corell, but about Michael Byrne. After a while, she took another shower. This time, though the weather was as sticky as ever, she emerged feeling clean. She was living again.

Mike got back a little after seven. He had some carnations with him—the cherry-colored kind with frilly white edges—and some ferns. He even managed to arrange them in a water tumbler so they looked pretty. Then he said, "I brought something else." He produced a small bottle of sloe-gin and a half-pint of whiskey. "Not a hell of a lot," he said.

"But just enough, Mike, just enough." She was suddenly in his arms. Just as she had known he would be, he was both strong and gentle.

He put her away, laughing, and said, "This time, I know I'm going to like New York." Then he went back to his room for an extra glass.

Later, he said, "Carla, you're in some kind of trouble. I wish you'd let me help you."

"You have, Mike, you have," she told him, and then she was in his arms again, laughing and crying at the same time.

He said, "What about that call you had me make, sweet? Have you seen your friend yet?"

That brought her out of it. She shook her head, dumb with misery. The thought—all these days, you've been dying to see Danny. Now he's coming and you wish he was dead—flashed through her head. Still, she owed Danny a lot, especially now. She tried to frame a sentence, but Mike said it for her. "You want, I'll take off and wait till you're finished."

"You're too damned good to be real, Mike," she whispered. "It may be a long wait."

There was a tightness to his mouth as he replied, "One thing I've got, sweet, is patience. I'll wait."

It was a long wait—from a little after nine, when he left, till almost midnight. Wanda sat on the bed, smoking one cigarette after another, not daring to drink. Not that Danny would mind—he'd seen her soured often enough—but she knew she needed her wits about her. Danny was the jealous type, and she didn't dare risk blabbing to him about Mike when he asked her how things were going.

So she waited, while the minutes ticked by in slow-march. She made up her mind, if Danny didn't show by midnight, she'd go to Mike and stay with him and forget about Danny and everything else that had to do with the

mess she was in. Just seven more minutes by the tiny platinum-and-diamond watch on her wrist.

Then it came—two quick, soft raps on the door. She called, "Come in," and Danny was there, with her. She said, wondering why she could no longer stand the sight of him, "Hi, Danny, I hated to bother you, but I had to."

"You dumb broad," he said softly. "Who's the character you had call up Joe this afternoon? You working with the cops or something? Not that I'd put it past you. Anything for a lousy buck."

"No, Danny—it was just a guy I met in a bar. I didn't want to call myself in case Joe wasn't safe." To her surprise, she found she was crying again.

"You sure it was nobody?" he asked. And, at her nod, "Whats-a-matter, you drunk or something?"

She shook her head, and, suddenly, he was on her. He had a necktie in his hands and then it was around her neck, getting tighter. "I don't mind your cheating with Peter," he said fiercely. "It's the way you funneled back the dough I was milking from him. He had the nerve to laugh about it, right in my face. When I saw that stinking green elephant in your place"

Wanda tried to scream, but she could hardly grunt. The strong silk of the tie was cutting into her throat, choking off speech as well

as breath. She felt her lungs catch fire, knew she was going to die. Her eyeballs seemed to burst from her head.

Then Mike was there, and a couple of other men, and the pressure was off. When her vision returned, Mike was feeding her sloe-gin, and they were taking Danny away. Taking Danny away . . . "Mike, she gasped through a raw larynx, "those are cops."

"Sure," he said soothingly. "I'm sorry we had to wait so long, but we had to. We not only couldn't find Danny—we couldn't figure out why a blackmailer should want to kill the guy who was paying him off. But thanks to you, and the elephant—once we'd located you, we had to use you for a stake-out." He picked up the green-jade toy, that had been knocked to the carpet in the struggle.

Then he came back to her and said, "Sweet, you're a nice girl. I wasn't kidding about wanting to see you, to help you"

She was up then, all the smells back in her head, the spit-sweat-and-tobacco smell of the station houses, the woman-vomit-and-formaldehyde smell of the detention cells, the lye-soap-and-moldy-paint smell of the house of correction where she had spent two years. All she could remember was that she was Wanda Reese again, with her apartment and her clothes and a few thousand dollars

still in her bank account—and that this man was a policeman; a policeman who had made a fool of her and almost gotten her killed.

She said, "I suppose they'll pin a medal on you for this, copper."

She had hurt him, and she was glad. He was the enemy, the life-long enemy. He said, "For God's

sake, sweet, I meant what I said."

"A novelty, I'm sure," she told him, her hand at her throat. She extended the other, "Do I get the elephant, or do you get to keep that, too?"

He looked at it, still in his hand, then at her. Then, his face remote and impassive, he tossed it on the bed.



A Short Short Story by

MATTHEW LEE

A ruthless, successful man who steals the wife of a worthless failure does not look for trouble. However, weakness can prove a most deadly weapon.

Home Ground

HARLAN WAYNE had made the trip to Cottstown buoyed by inner certainty that Philip Morrison would never find him there. He hadn't intended to use the little city, where he had spent part of his youth, as a permanent refuge. His plan had been merely to get Phil off his and Laura's trail for a breathing spell, until he could work out more permanent plans for the two of them.

Yet, when he went downstairs in the hotel, less than an hour after he and Laura had checked in, there was Phil Morrison, sitting in an armchair under one of the potted palms in the old-fashioned lobby, with a magazine on his lap. As always, Phil looked absurdly innocuous, absurdly inadequate, to be married to a woman as vivid and vital as Laura.

It was not that Phil was unattractive—if anything, he ran a little too much to good looks in a florid, purposeless way. His was the classic, perennial-sophomore

type of non-success in a harsh, post-graduate world. Harlan Wayne had seen hundreds of Phil Morrisons in his forty-odd years.

They were always around, letting the Harlan Waynes pay the checks in expensive restaurants after failing to put over their flawed or untimely deals. They were forever applying at personnel offices for jobs that, for them, would never exist. They were the inevitable failures whose good looks and popularity Harlan Wayne had once bitterly envied, for whom he now felt only contempt.

Finishing the purchase of Corona panatellas that had brought him to the lobby, Harlan Wayne strolled over to where Phil Morrison sat looking at him with a dogged and defeated, yet annoyingly hopeful, look on his too-handsome face.

Wayne stood over him, using the height advantage that found him standing and Morrison sitting down—when both men were

standing, the futile Morrison topped him by almost six inches.

He said, "What in hell do you think you're doing here, Phil?"

Morrison said, "You know as well as I do, Harlan. A husband still has certain rights in this country."

"You forfeited any rights you have in Laura years ago, Phil," Harlan Wayne told him brutally. "My detectives have enough on you for her to get a divorce in any state of the union. Why don't you go back to Chicago and leave her alone?"

"You know the answer to that," said Phil Morrison. There was unusual determination, as well as a sort of slyness, in his expression. He added, "You have my terms—meet them, and I'll leave you alone."

"You won't get another red cent out of me," Harlan Wayne said quietly. "How long can you keep this up—following us around the country? I know your financial condition as well as your rottenness."

"Until you pay off or give up Laura," was the reply.

"Fat chance you have of getting either out of me," said Wayne.

Both men had been speaking quietly, and their conversation had attracted no special attention. But Morrison's voice rose a notch as he said, "There's another alternative you wouldn't like, Harlan—an alienation-of-affections suit.

You try to run away once more, and your lawyers will be hearing from mine. Put up or shut up."

For a moment, Harlan Wayne was tempted to hit Phil Morrison where he sat. A one-time almost All-American football player turned into an all-time All-American rat—that was Laura's husband. Fearing to make a spectacle of himself in the lobby of his home-town hotel, he turned on his heel and walked swiftly, furiously, to the elevators.

Laura was waiting for him in the drawing room of the bridal suite. Brilliantly brunette, slimly yet luxuriantly full-bodied, she was, as always since Wayne had met her, sensitive to his every mood. Regarding him as he entered, she rose swiftly, came to him.

"Something's wrong," she said with quiet concern. "Is it Phil?"

"What else?" Wayne countered. "That worthless punk of a husband of yours is sitting downstairs right now. He even had the almighty gall to threaten me with an alienation suit if I don't pay him off."

Laura's slim, strong, exquisite fingers gripped his biceps. Her voice was low, anxious, as she said, "Darling, why not give him what he wants? You can afford it, and, this way, nothing's any good. I know Phil—he's weak, but he has the stubbornness of the weak man. He'll never give up till you

pay him—he'll make trouble for you. And you know I could never bear that. I'd rather go back to him than have him cause you a breath of scandal."

Wayne gave her a hug and left her, to sit down and bite off the end of one of the cigars he had purchased before the unpleasant encounter downstairs. As always, a moment with Laura restored his detachment, his ability to think with a clear head.

He said, "First Chicago—then New York, Philadelphia, Atlantic City. Now Cottstown. Dammit, Laura, I never thought he could stick to any purpose so long—not even in the hope of regaining you. But now . . ." He let it trail off as he lighted his smoke.

Laura sat gracefully on the arm of his chair. She said, "Whatever you do will be the right thing, darling."

He looked at her and nodded. After all, he was on home ground in Cottstown. His mind, which had made him a multi-millionaire, began to work with its accustomed precision. Whatever he did . . .

Phil Morrison was waiting for Wayne in the taproom of Hillside, Cottstown's one decent roadhouse. It hadn't proved difficult for Wayne to arrange a meeting outside of the hotel. All he had had to say was, "If I pay you off, as I intend to, Laura must know nothing about it."

With Laura, he had pleaded a business engagement. He had left for the date early, had then taken an hour to scout the surroundings of Hillside and the route from Cottstown, which he had known so well in his youth. Thus, Phil Morrison's battered 1951 Buick was awaiting him in the twilit parking lot of the roadhouse on Wayne's arrival.

A check for fifty thousand dollars—made out to Philip Morrison and countersigned by Wayne—was in his pocket. With it, was an agreement for Morrison to leave both Laura and himself alone in the future. This he had written on hotel stationery, in the lobby, so Laura would know nothing about it. He was sure of her love, but, as a sensitive woman, he feared she might not appreciate the cold-bloodedness of its terms.

Morrison had already had several drinks. Their presence was betrayed by the increased flush of his face, the somewhat too-loud tones of his voice, as well as by his inability to conceal the gleam of triumph in his usually watery blue eyes.

"This is illegal," said Morrison, after scanning the document Wayne had placed in front of him on the booth table they were sharing.

"So," said Wayne, "is what you're demanding of me. Once you have accepted and cashed the check I'm about to give you, this

contract will hold. Naturally, I've consulted my attorneys in Chicago. They told me how to draw it up."

There was a long pause, then Phil Morrison pulled a pen from his breast pocket and scribbled his signature at the bottom of the agreement. He held it until Wayne produced the check and laid it on the tablecloth. Then he handed the agreement to Wayne.

"There's just one more thing," Wayne told him. "I want you to leave Cottstown and head for Chicago immediately. I don't want Laura to have the unpleasantness of even a chance off seeing you again."

Morrison shrugged. "As you wish," he said. "Shall we go?"

Wayne rose, told Laura's husband, "There's a short-cut to the main highway half a mile down the road. I'll lead the way and put you on it. And no tricks, if you don't want that check stopped."

Morrison bowed low, with an ironical smile, and motioned for Wayne to precede him from the roadhouse taproom. Wayne was not entirely surprised when he had to ante up another six dollars for the check. *Good old Phil—game to the end!* he thought as he put his alligator-skin billfold back into his pocket.

By the time he reached the cut-off, with Phil Morrison's headlights glowing brightly in his rear-view mirror, it was dark—he had

planned it that way. He drove over the uneven macadam surface through the woods, for about a third of a mile, then pulled over to the side.

When Morrison pulled to a halt, beside him, Wayne gestured ahead and told him, "Just keep on following it for another mile and a half, and you'll hit the highway."

He didn't bother with any goodbye, just sat there, watching Phil pick up speed as if relieved at being rid of such a slow guide. Wayne had planned that, too. He watched Phil's twin taillights vanish around the curve in the road fifty yards ahead. Then he heard the abrupt screech of brakes, followed by the splash.

He ran his convertible ahead to the curve, stopped and got out. Ahead, around the bend, was the swamp that had, for a century, defied all efforts to drain or fill it in. By his headlights, there was not a trace of Phil's beat-up old Buick, or of Phil. Nothing as heavy as a car—or a man—had ever been recovered from the swamp.

Carefully, he dragged the white sawhorse from the scrub beside the old road-without-an-end and placed it across the lumpy pavement. He glanced at the warning sign before climbing back into his convertible and backing it around. He cut his headlights before reaching the road to town and made it without witnesses. As ever, he told

himself, Phil had been a fool, offering him battle on his home ground.

Driving back to the hotel, he plotted how best to break it to Laura. All he would say was, "Honey, you'll never see Phil again. It cost me fifty thousand, but it was worth all of that—many times over." That was the sort of compliment Laura understood—and appreciated. He knew her like a book, a book of which he was never going to grow tired.

But Laura was not in the bridal suite. Spotting the envelope on the table in the drawing room, he blessed her for her thoughtfulness. Tearing it open, he felt the excitement of freedom, freedom to live, to love as they liked, opening up in brightly colored new vistas in front of him—in front of them both. No more Phil to spoil things . . .

He read the note with growing disbelief—

.....called me after you left and told me you finally decided to pay him the money. Thanks, Harlan, because it means everything to us. I know Phil's weak, but I can't help loving him. I guess I'm just a one-man woman. Try not to think too harshly of me—I'd like to believe I was worth the money while you had me . . .

There was more. She was meeting Phil in Chicago the next day. She hoped he wouldn't be vindictive, because of certain things she had discovered about his affairs, certain deals the Bureau of Internal Revenue might be glad to look into if they knew about them. As long as she and Phil were all right, he had nothing whatever to worry about.

He tore up the letter and threw it in the wastebasket. Then he sat down and chewed on a cigar. He wondered how long he dared wait.



NORMAN DANIELS

A second-generation killer with a gun, an isolated skyscraper roof on a Sunday afternoon, near zero weather—these were what Landin had to contend with if he was to escape with his life. His only weapons were wits.

Rooftop

I WONDERED when he was going to pull the trigger, but even more, I wondered why. In the first place, I'd never seen him before—in the second place, I had no enemies that I knew of, particularly none who looked to be little more than a kid.

I judged his age to be about nineteen, but if you studied his eyes and the twist to the left corner of his mouth, he could have been forty. I'm a structural engineer, and I come in contact with a lot of tough men, but this kid looked plain mean. Like someone who grew up in a slum and liked it that way, because its ugliness offered him an excuse for hate.

I said, "All right—if this is a stickup, I'll give you my wallet."

"This ain't a stickup, Mr. Landin," he said. "I'm just acting for someone else to get what she has coming to her—from you."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but why do you need a gun?" I asked.

"Just to even things up," he told me. "I'm a little guy, and you're a big shot. They tell me you put up this building."

"That's true," I said.

"And it ain't finished yet, even if you got a nice office up here on the top floor. There ain't nobody above the eighth floor yet. There ain't even a super, except the engineer who runs the furnaces. Being Sunday afternoon, nobody's likely to show."

I kept wondering if I could maneuver so as to make a pass at that gun, but decided against it. At forty-two, my reflexes were good, but I doubted they'd be equal to this young punk's. I was thinking that he appeared to be a particularly vicious and deadly little rat.

"Answer me," he said. "Am I right or wrong?"

"You're right. Now, tell me what you want."

"Sure, but first I want you to know a couple of things about me. My name is Jigger Abbott. That mean anything to you?"

I said, "No. Why should it?"

He squinted at me. "Think again. Jigger Abbott—Jigger—oh, the hell with it. He was my old man, and he used to run a mob."

I remembered then. "Yes," I said. "I remember him. But I never met him or had anything to do with him."

"Who says you did? He'd never bother with a square like you. I just want you to know that I'm like he was. Just like he was—only they won't burn me, and I'll be bigger'n he ever was. That's why I'm here."

I was getting sick of the gun, pointed at me by a kid whose father had been a deadly killer and had gone to the electric chair for murder when this boy couldn't have been more than four or five.

I said, "Put that gun down and tell me what you want."

He hefted the pistol, but he didn't put it down. "It's a nice gun, ain't it? Know where this came from? Al Capone's trigger man gave it to my old man. Get that? Al's trigger man."

"Fascinating," I said.

"You're a wise guy," he told me. "I don't like wise guys. Neither did my old man—he hated 'em. Okay, I'll tell you why I'm here. Four months ago, a guy named Patsy Eaton fell off one of your damn buildings."

"What's that got to do with you?" I asked.

"Patsy's daughter and me are like *that*. Her old man got killed on one of your jobs, and it's your fault."

I started to reach for the pack of cigarettes on my desk, but thought better of it. The kid had pale green eyes, flecked with yellow. I'd seen those kind of eyes on a cougar once—just before I shot him.

"Now hold on a second," I said. "I don't know what you want, but you might as well get the story straight. Eaton did work for me. He was fired two months before he got killed. The day it happened, he showed up on the job, and he was drunk. He was told to get out, but he didn't go. Instead, he climbed up five stories and fell. The insurance company wouldn't pay, and neither will I."

"We figure," the kid said, "that it's worth seventy grand. Now all you gotta do is write a letter to Patsy's kid and say you know she rates the dough. Then write a check, and we'll just mail it to her. Date the letter and the check yesterday. How about it, Mr. Landin?"

I said, "If I don't, I suppose I get shot."

"That's right," he said cheerfully. "And I ain't a patient guy. My pop used to say—you got a sucker on the hook, pull him in fast before something happens. So you write the letter and the check, beginning right now."

He impressed me—even a kid with a gun in his fist can be impressive. The whole scheme was crazy anyway. I could stop payment on a check—though I supposed he had thought of that too. I used my stationery and wrote a letter in longhand. I made out a check, clipped it to the letter and put the whole thing in an envelope. After I addressed it, I pasted on the stamp. He watched me with those green-yellow flecked eyes, as if I might pull a gun on him at any moment.

"That's fine," he said. "Now I ain't touching that, on account of fingerprints. We take a walk out to the hall and drop it down the mail slot, okay?"

"If you say so."

"Then," he said, "we go up on the roof. I want to see what the view looks like from there."

I didn't let him know that I realized his intention all too well. The crazy kid meant to throw me off the roof. That was his way of thinking it out. His girl would get this letter and the check—dated before my death. It would have to be honored. I'd just set myself up as a killer's victim.

I said, "Why the roof? The temperature is about zero up there."

"I want to see the view," he repeated, and he drove the barrel of the gun into my ribs hard enough to make me wince.

I walked ahead of him to the corridor. There wasn't a chance

of anyone seeing us. I was beginning to give the kid credit for having more brains than I had realized. The mail slot was right next to the stairway to the roof—a steep, narrow stairway—and the door was held ajar by a couple of bricks, because the plaster on the walls wasn't quite dry yet.

I dropped the envelope down the slot and wondered if I was dropping my life with it. I turned around. The kid was just a little careless. I suppose he thought the hard part of his self-assigned job was finished. He stood beside the partly open door, and all I had to do was reach out my hand and push the door into his face.

I used all my strength, and it was enough to send him reeling back, but not enough to knock him down. There wasn't a chance to jump the gun. There was even less of a chance to sprint for the down stairway, so I did the only thing I could. I ran up the stairs to the roof.

It took him a few seconds to get his breath and his wits back, and then he started after me. I was at the top by this time, and I had the heavy door open. There was a key on the inside of the lock. I managed to get this free, and I was putting it into the outside of the door when he started shooting.

One slug missed me by a sixteenth of an inch. I didn't need a ruler to measure its closeness—I

could feel its wind on my cheek as it whined past. He had me right where he wanted me. The heavy door wasn't easy to close. If I tried to duck behind it, he'd get me with the next bullet.

I just stood there while he climbed the stairs. He gave me a shove with the flat of his hand and then went by me. He turned and pointed the gun at my heart. I pushed the door closed, put my back against it and hoped he didn't see me turn the key.

He said, "You got more nerve than I figured, Mr. Landin. I like a guy with guts, but it ain't going to do you any good."

I had to take a chance. I reasoned that he wouldn't want to shoot me. The validity of the check might be questioned if I was unquestionably a murder victim. The same idea must have been stored away in that brain of his, because, when I lunged to the right to get away from the gun, he didn't shoot. All he did was clout me over the head with the barrel—hard enough so that I was sent staggering back against the door.

"Okay," he said, "it's too cold to fool around up here. Start walking and keep right on going."

"Going where?" I asked, keeping up the foolish pretense that I didn't know what he was talking about.

"Right off the edge of the roof, pal. I don't want that check stopped, get it? And what the hell

—you put up this building, so it's possible you were up here just to look things over, and you fell off."

I said, "I don't exactly feel like committing suicide."

"Okay," he told me. "I'll knock you cold and roll you off. Hell I got nothing against you."

I started walking. I made my way across the roof, stopped and looked around. This was the tallest building for maybe half a mile. It topped everything else, so nobody could possibly see us. Besides, it was far downtown, and streets below were as empty on a Sunday afternoon as they were busy on a week day.

I moved along the edge—but didn't let myself get too close. It was cold—only a few degrees above zero—and I was beginning to feel it. All I had on was my suit. The kid was more comfortable. He wore a heavy overcoat and a muffler.

He got sick of trailing behind me, although he stood for it longer than I'd hoped he would. He said, "Okay—make up your mind. How do you want it?"

I turned around and regarded him for a moment, wondering if that twisted little mind of his was going to be able to digest what I intended to tell him.

"I'm not going to jump," I said. "And you're not going to knock me out and push me over."

His was an unexpectedly cunning brain.

He said, "Mister, you know something. What is it?"

I said, "You want the money that check will bring you and your girl. If I die up here on the roof, you'll not only never lay your hands on the money, but you'll be arrested for murder. What's more, you'll be convicted."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded. He looked around quickly as if he thought someone else might be up here with us.

I spelled it out for him. "There's one door on this roof. There's no fire escape, no other way to get off. The door happens to be a used one, installed temporarily until the new door is made up. It also happens to be a very strong door, and it locks with a key."

"So what?" he asked. The kid was getting sore and worried. It was a bad combination for a man at the other end of his gun.

"It's simple, kid. I locked the door, and I've hidden the key. You can't get off the roof. If I go overside, the cops will come up here to investigate, and you'll have a hard time explaining why you're here and what happened. If you shoot me—the same thing—you'll be here when the cops arrive."

"Give me the key," he said.

I shook my head. "That would be like giving my life away."

He whipped me across the face with the gun before he ran to the door and checked. He pulled at

the knob, he tried to break it down with his shoulder. Finally, he put the muzzle of his gun against the lock and fired.

I'd been afraid of that. Not because a bullet would smash the lock, but because it might foul up the mechanism so that even the use of the key wouldn't get us off the roof.

I laughed out loud at him, and I turned up the collar of my coat and stood there, shivering. There was a sharp wind that high up, and it cut like ice.

The kid walked up to me. "You can't get away with it," he warned. "I'll get that key if I have to kill you by inches."

"You're wrong, kid. I'm a dead man anyway—but when I die, so do you."

He yelled at me, cursing me, while he searched my pockets. Then he began looking for the key all over the roof. I wished I had the pack of cigarettes that rested on my desk a floor below. Even the heat offered by a burning tip would be a comfort. I began to shiver harder. The cold went right through me.

But I laughed at the kid's desperation and felt as happy as could be expected under the circumstances. He checked the rooftop, foot by foot. He even climbed the water tower, presumably on the theory that I might have thrown the key up there. It took him half an hour before he was

satisfied that I hadn't hidden the key—unless it was on my person, and his first search had missed it. He walked up to me, dangerously angry.

"I want that key," he said. "I want it now."

I told him then. "I'll unlock the door when you give me your gun."

He backed up a step. "Turn around," he ordered. "You got that key on you, and I'm going to find it. I'm Jigger Abbott's son, remember?"

I turned around and raised my hands. In so doing, I made my first bad mistake. He simply stepped up behind me and swung the gun butt. My knees buckled, and I went down, but there wasn't quite enough steam in the blow to put me out.

I put the flat of my hand against the ice-cold roof to do a push-up. I saw his foot go back. I knew what he was going to do, but I was too dazed to do anything about it. He kicked me beside the right temple, and my push-up expired along with my senses. I had a vague feeling that I was already off the edge of the roof and on my way down.

That sensation changed after a while. I thought I was being tossed around in a polar sea. There were gigantic ice cubes all around me, and the water kept getting colder and colder until I felt like an olive, slipped by accident into the mixer instead of the cocktail glass. I

knew I couldn't survive this cold much longer. It would chill the blood in my veins until it became thin, crimson ice. It wouldn't circulate any more, though it would make little difference, because my heart was already a block of ice.

There were bells too. The 'damnedest things were filtering through the black cloud of unconsciousness. Church bells! I didn't have any business hearing church bells, because I hadn't attended services for years, though at this moment, I thought it might be a good idea.

There was a driving pain, like a hot iron, in my side. It came again and again until I realized someone was kicking me. I opened my eyes and looked at the ash-grey surface of the rooftop. I wondered who had fished me out of the ice-filled sea.

"Get up," he was saying. "On your feet!"

I didn't have any feet. My being began somewhere near the top of my head and extended only as far down as the area of my jaw—mainly because my jaw was sore. Below the jawline, I didn't exist.

The crazy kid got a handful of my hair and pulled me up to a sitting position. I sat there, staring down at my legs. I *did* have legs after all, I thought. The fact seemed odd. They were very white legs except for the parts where they were blue. I'd never heard of anyone with white and blue legs.

I'd be patriotic as hell if I bled a little.

But how did it happen I could see all that skin? The last I knew, I was wearing pants. A hand went down, rubbed along my thigh. I barely felt it. Then I realized my arm and shoulder were naked, too. I shook my head, got some of my senses back. Damned if I wasn't dressed only in shorts.

"How do you feel now, wise guy?" the kid asked.

Full realization came back to me. That little punk had knocked me out, searched me for the key and, not finding it, had stripped me down. He was going to freeze me into submission.

Somehow, I managed to get to my feet. I saw my clothes flung wildly over the rooftop. I staggered toward the big brick chimney and leaned against it. For a few minutes, I enjoyed the faint warmth the bricks gave off, but the kid soon sensed what I was doing.

"Get away from there," he said. "You're going to freeze until you tell me where the key is."

"Maybe I threw it over the edge," I said.

"The hell you did!" He had more brains than I'd given him credit for. "That'd be like killing yourself. Get away from that chimney."

I didn't move. "Go ahead and shoot," I said. "What's the difference? So you'll kill me, but they'll

send you over the same route they sent that lousy old man of yours."

"Shut up," he screamed at me. "Keep that mouth of yours shut. I'm warning you . . ."

"They'll carry you to the chair—like they carried him," I said. "You're all alike."

He fired. I barely felt the bullet that plowed into my thigh—that's how cold I was. But the shock made my leg buckle, and I fell. I lay there, damning him. I asked him for my shirt to use as a bandage, and I got sneered at and threatened some more. I put my hand down hard on the wound, hoping it would stop the bleeding. It didn't—but the cold did.

I looked up at him. "We're getting no place," I said. "Without the key, you're finished. Hear those church bells? That's vespers, though I doubt that the word is familiar to you. I'll explain—vespers is an evening service. That means it's getting dark. As soon as the sun goes down, so will the temperature. Even that overcoat won't keep you from freezing then."

"You'll freeze too," he said, "if I don't put a slug through your guts and sit here and watch you die."

He was capable of it. I had to move carefully now—and, above all, avoid mention of his father. I said, "There'll be no one to watch you die. You can't attract attention up here. Nobody can see you,

and we're too high for shouting to do any good. If you're going through with this screwball scheme, I'd advise you to keep a bullet in the gun. You'll want it before midnight."

"*I'll kick you to pieces!*" he screamed, and the mounting, icy wind seemed to pick up his shrill fury and cast it around like an echo. "*I'll make* you tell me where that key is."

I reached down deep and found a smile I didn't know I had. "So long, kid," I said.

He pulled his foot back, but after a moment he relaxed, as if he realized there wasn't any use. He walked around the rooftop—fast, stamping his feet—but I could see his face turning crimson as the cold bit into him. I was already numb. Maybe, I thought, I could stand it another hour. But not much longer than an hour—pretty soon I'd have to begin fighting to stay awake.

You just closed your eyes and fell asleep when you froze to death. Or did you have to be buried alive in a snow bank to earn such solace? I was damned well going to find out pretty soon. The wound in my thigh should have been aching badly, but I didn't even feel it. I stretched the leg all the way out and wiggled my toes. They moved, but a bit sluggishly, and it took a lot of effort.

The kid was stamping around again. His overcoat was shoddy—

it wouldn't keep out the cold forever. It was a toss-up now—as to who could stand the most cold. I lay back, looking up at the darkening sky while the stars began to come out.

Cold, cold stars—Maybe there was something up there for me. All I had to do to find out was close my eyes and let myself go. It was as easy as that. I was shaking so hard I thought an arm or a leg might break off. The kid was standing there, looking down at me.

"Here it comes," he said. "I'm sick of fooling around."

I laughed. I suppose it was an unpleasant laugh, because the kid's face grew drawn and anguished. I said, "Like father, like son—except he got burned to death, and you'll freeze to death. But then, you can always jump."

He shouted his shrill curses. He kicked me half a dozen times. I didn't even feel it. I closed my eyes again. To hell with him, I thought. Then, far in the back of my mind, I found a small, lurking doubt. What if the kid got away with it! What if I died, and he somehow got off the roof? Nothing, I remembered, was impossible. If he did, he'd get that money—he and his girl friend would cash the check. Right there, the nucleus of a brand-new gang would be formed. What would I be turning loose on this city I had helped to build?

I managed to raise myself on one elbow. "Do you want to listen to me, kid, do you want to shoot me, or do I just lie back and let myself freeze to death?"

"Talk all you want," he snarled at me. "Words won't do you no good."

If he didn't care, he'd have refused to listen. I said, "What's it getting you, kid? You said your old man was smart. What would he do in a case of this kind?"

"Blow your goddamn head off," the kid yelled.

"Then he wouldn't be smart—like you said he was. Look here, kid, nobody with brains fights what he knows he can't lick. I can't get off this roof unless you let me. You can't get off unless I give you the key—and you know by now that I won't."

"If you're talking a deal, forget it," he said.

"Sure it's a deal," I said. "Why not? So far, you're guilty of attempted blackmail and attempted murder. That isn't actual murder. They can't burn you. The choice is yours, kid. Die here or go to jail for awhile. You've got—at the outside—ten or fifteen minutes to make up your mind. I won't last much longer."

"How do I know you really got the key?" he asked.

Then I knew I had him.

"What would be the sense to all this if I didn't have it?"

"It's not on the roof, it ain't in

your clothes. Where is it, damn you?"

"Give me the gun," I said.

He stamped his feet some more, flapped his arms, looked colder than ever. I didn't feel a thing. I was numb from head to foot. All of a sudden, he sobbed. He blubbered like the nasty little embryo he was. Then he threw the gun down on the roof beside me.

I had a lot of will power and a little hope, but hardly any strength. The hardest thing I ever did was to turn over, so I could put my hand around the gun butt. I imagined it felt warm—from his hand.

"Get my clothes," I told him. "Hurry it up—I'm almost finished."

He was on the receiving end this time. He was so anxious to save his own life that he helped me into my pants and shirt and even took off his overcoat and put it around me.

I managed to stand up, with his help, but then I pushed him away. It was a weak push—a gnat could have done as well—but all the kid needed was the implication. He stepped away.

I staggered over to the door, let myself slide down. Now came the dangerous part. Once I had the key, he wasn't going to be easy to handle. My fingers were numb, but I could still feel the metal pencil clipped to the pocket of my coat, and I got it free.

I put the end of the pencil under the door, tilted it, pulled it toward me. After a few hair-raising failures, I saw the key glistening like a diamond as I dragged it from under the door.

He was yelling something. My fingers closed around the key, clumsily, but I'd put my left hand inside the overcoat long enough to get the blood circulating sluggishly, and I could manipulate them. My other hand seemed completely numb and held the gun only because my fingers were frozen around it.

"You shoved it under the door!" he shrilled. "Damn you! Under the door! *Under the door!* It was there all the time!"

"You're smart," I said. "Like your old man, you're smart. Why didn't you find it, smart guy?"

He came toward me. I fired the gun. At least it went off, though I had no real sensation of pulling the trigger. The slug missed him, but it straightened things out in his mind. He had no desire to die.

I got the door open, and the warm air that came up felt like the blast from a furnace. I let it fan all around me until my skin started tingling.

"Mr. Landin," the kid was saying. "Please, Mr. Landin—I'm cold! I'm dying I'm so cold!"

I let him go first, and not out of politeness. My thigh, my whole body, was giving me fits. The wound was beginning to bleed

again. We reached the bottom of the stairs and went on out into corridor.

I picked up one of the bricks that had held the door open, and I smashed it against his skull as hard as I could. A blow with the gun wouldn't have been as effective.

I let him lie there, because there was nothing else I could do. I moved toward my office down the hall. I knew I had only a few seconds left. I made my legs travel faster. Miracle of miracles—I was inside! I picked up the phone. My finger found the slot for the operator, and I dialed. I thought the end of my finger was going to break off.

Then they came—as I thought they might—the shakes! I began shivering from head to foot. The police understood me, but it took what seemed like a long while to get the words around my chattering teeth.

They fed me whiskey from a bottle in my office—only after they got me to the hospital, was I given hot coffee. The wound wasn't too bad. I'd be up and out of there in a few days—that's what they told me.

As it turned out, the doctors were right. They put young Jigger Abbott in the prison ward of the same hospital, and he didn't get out for two-and-a-half weeks. It seems he had caught pneumonia.

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